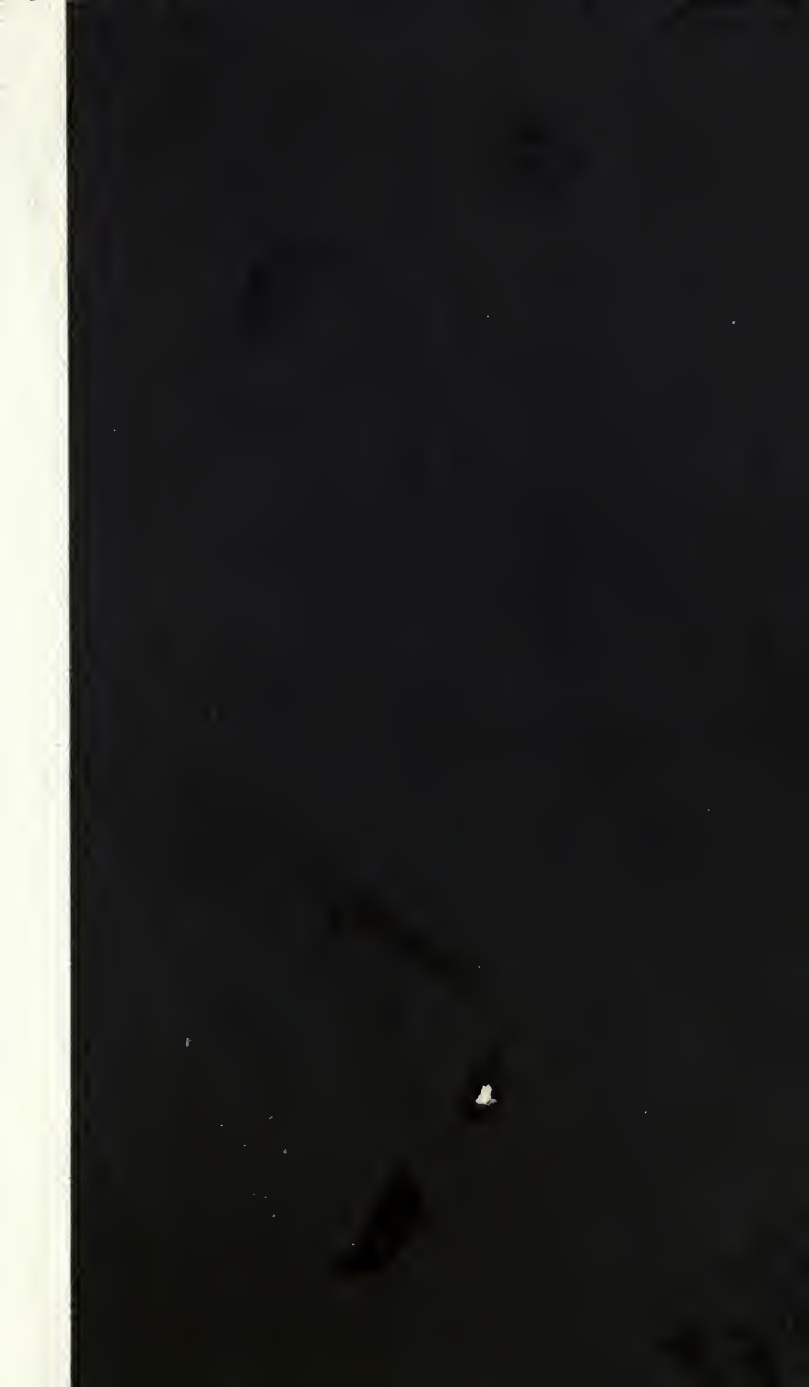




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*J. W. von Goethe*  
*from a portrait painted in 1828 by Stieler?*

# GOETHE

REVIEWED AFTER SIXTY YEARS

BY

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## PREFACE.

I PUBLISHED three papers on Goethe in the *Contemporary Review* for 1884. These are now with the kind consent of the Editor re-printed. They have been carefully revised throughout, have received large alterations and, especially in the latter part, considerable additions.

The number of persons among us who are called upon to devote some time to the study of Goethe's writings must be large, for it includes in the first place all who desire to acquire a knowledge of modern literature, and in the second place all those who desire to master the German language. Now, of all great writers there is scarcely one who more imperatively requires than Goethe to be read with some sort of companion or key. His writings are extremely various in style; many of them are abstract, some of them are mysterious; in the Second Part of Faust he positively plumes himself upon his own mysteriousness. Throughout he deviates from

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the beaten track of literature ; he has an object of his own and a style of his own ; and is perhaps more difficult to appreciate satisfactorily than any one of our own leading writers.

But a key to Goethe would be no small book ; it would be a book three or four times as large as that now offered to the public. It would include some connected account of Goethe's life and some sufficient explanation of his principal writings both in verse and prose. And around all these principal writings, "Götz, Werther, Tasso, Iphigenie, Hermann and Dorothea, Wilhelm Meister, Faust, the Elective Affinities, and the West-Östlicher Divan, a literature has grown up, of which no abridgment could be given in any short space.

But is there not room for a short and slight book like this, which, without professing any sort of completeness, might usefully accompany the reader of Goethe in his studies? It is not well to bury a great and delightful poet under a weight of commentary. And Goethe-literature is in general too cumbrous. Yet a writer who tries to write a small book on so large a subject encounters certain difficulties. He is tempted in the first place to lose himself

in vague panegyric. How Goethe is the greatest modern poet since Shakspeare, how he has a certain breadth and serenity peculiar to himself, on these texts it is only too easy to enlarge through many chapters. Moreover, the subject bristles with common-places, which it is by no means easy to put on one side. It could not be otherwise when we consider that for the best part of a century German thoroughness inspired by German national pride has been ceaselessly busy upon the life and writings of Goethe.

The Germans themselves are indeed abundantly furnished with companions to Goethe of every size and degree of thoroughness. But it can scarcely be said that in English there are as yet too many books on Goethe. Much valuable work has no doubt been done on him by Englishmen, beginning with Carlyle and ending with the Goethe Society. Nevertheless it may be questioned whether after all Goethe has been sufficiently domesticated among us. I can therefore imagine that this volume may be found useful, in spite of its slightness and incompleteness, if it is light enough to be read without effort or fatigue, and at the same time

true enough and fresh enough to delineate faithfully a great genius and a great personality, avoiding the common-places with which the subject has been beset.

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# GOETHE

*REVIEWED AFTER SIXTY YEARS*

## CHAPTER I.

'TIS SIXTY YEARS SINCE.

GOETHE died in 1832, on March 22nd. That is, he died sixty-one years ago ; and he died in the same year as Scott, two years before Coleridge, eighteen years before Wordsworth ; and on the other hand, eight years after Byron, and twenty-seven years after Schiller. When he died he was recognized as the sovereign name in German literature ; nay, as being at the moment the sovereign name in European literature.

Among ourselves Carlyle had already begun to hymn his praise in the round-mouthed manner characteristic of him. In Goethe, he said,

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was to be found the cure for all the evils that affected the modern mind. He was the prince of modern letters and of modern thought. Young men whose views of life were not yet settled, and who suffered from the disease of the age, were bidden to take the simple prescription which was conveyed in the words, "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe." It would be rash to say that the English public accepted this view. They recognized the impressive eloquence of Carlyle, and in the main they recognized that his exalted view of Goethe was shared by other good authorities. Ever since that time Goethe has been for us all the greatest of German writers, and in the very front rank of the writers of modern Europe. A few here and there have followed Carlyle in giving him a transcendental position quite above that of great poets in general, as a few here and there have turned from him with slight appreciation, for instance De Quincey, and more recently, Mr. Edward Fitzgerald, who says that to him Goethe is a critic and a philosopher, but not a poet.

So much of the past generation. Great writers on their way to immortality pass through several stages between death and that goal.



The question has to be answered, whether the generation which follows their death will like them as well as that which saw them die; and also the question whether their works will prove equally congenial to a world modified by new circumstances and revolutions in Church and State, and pre-occupied by new poets and authors who have sprung up to take their place. Sometimes it appears suddenly, some twenty or thirty years after the great author's death, that the new time knows him no more; that a new leaf of opinion has been turned over, and that his ideas and fancies have hopelessly lost their charm; so that the author who seemed certainly on his way to the stars returns suddenly to the earth and is lost in the perishable crowd. But further than this, if great authors are to be compared to stars, we may say of them that in the earlier stages of their posthumous existence they do not take their place as fixed stars, but disappear and reappear with periodicity like comets or like planets. Their fame has eclipses and revivals during many years, while the question of immortality seems to remain pending. And so about Goethe several questions now arise.

Sixty years since he seemed the undoubted sovereign of German literature. Does he seem so still, now that Germany has produced many other writers? Sixty years since he seemed to us all among the greatest of modern writers. Does he seem so still, after Victor Hugo has run his prodigious career? Does he seem so to us who have seen Tennyson retain his poetic inspiration in a great old age? And now that the age has changed so much, and that the disease of the age is so different from what it was under the reign of Byron, what are we to think of those magnificent rhapsodies of Carlyle and of that "Close thy Byron; open thy Goethe"?

These questions resolve themselves into two. What do the Germans, themselves, think of Goethe after sixty years? and what ought we to think? Goethe's fame suffered a little eclipse in Germany in the early days of Liberalism; Börne spoke of him with passionate depreciation, and Heine, too, dropped some petulant words. But this is an affair of the past, and became considerably easier to understand from the day when Heine wrote, "As to the motive of these attacks on Goethe, I know at least what

it was in my own case. It was envy." But in these later days a cause has been at work to raise the fame of Goethe among his own countrymen higher than ever. The immense rise of the nation itself in power and self-respect, which took place in 1870, carried with it a sort of promotion of its great poet to a higher rank among poets. In Hermann Grimm's Lectures on Goethe (1877) Goethe is praised with an exaltation that had not, I think, been usual among German writers before 1870. He is now simply the greatest poet of all ages and nations (II. p. 296).

And again, "Antigone, Iphigenia, Ophelia, Imogen, Juliet, must yield the *pas* to Gretchen." "By possessing Faust and Gretchen the Germans hold the first place in the poetry of all ages and nations" (II. 266, 267). In short, the Germans are the greatest nation (since 1870), therefore their poet must be the greatest poet. Gervinus had not held this tone a few years before. Indeed, from Germany the latest cry is that the tide of admiration cannot be resisted; and that it is as vain now to exclaim impatiently, "Goethe und kein Ende!" as it was for Goethe himself to exclaim, "Shakspeare und kein

Ende!" at the beginning of the century. But his European fame is less settled than his national fame, and so the reappearance of Goethe before our public in recent years is a sign worth noting. It marks a new stage in his posthumous career. His English prophet, Carlyle, is gone; the generation that listened to Carlyle and studied Goethe under his advice is passing away. "Another race hath been, and other palms are won." And now we ask again, "Was it all true that Carlyle told us? Need we still study this foreign Goethe?" It might be some relief to be told that the fashion is past and need not be revived. For it is not much in our habits to study foreign literatures. There is actually only one foreign poet who has influenced us at all profoundly or lastingly, that is Dante. Are we bound to concede this very exceptional honour to Goethe also?

Some obvious considerations might tempt us to hold ourselves excused. Carlyle used to hold up Goethe as a light in religion and philosophy; a guardian who marched before us as a pillar of fire to show the way out of the scepticism of the eighteenth century into faith and serenity. But is not this a view difficult to

admit or to understand now that the eighteenth century, with its Voltaires and Fredericks and French revolutions, has receded so far into the distance; now that so many new forms of scepticism have appeared, and so many new ways of dealing with scepticism have been suggested? And if we are to grant that the nimbus of prophecy has faded from about his head, if we are to look at him again without prepossessions, as Scott or Coleridge looked at him in his own lifetime, and see in him only a distinguished literary man, the author of certain plays, novels, songs and epigrams, of certain fragments of autobiography, criticism and description, does any ground remain for paying him a homage different, not merely in degree but in kind, from that which we render to other great literary men who have adorned the nineteenth century—to such men, for instance, as Scott or Coleridge themselves, or as Byron, or as Victor Hugo?

Assuredly there is no danger that the author of "Faust" will not take rank with the highest of these men. But do his works justify us in raising him far beyond that rank, into the small first class of the select spirits of all time?

Why rank him, for instance, with Shakspeare? It may be fair, perhaps, to say that "Faust" would deserve rank, and even high rank, among the Shakspearian dramas; but then "Faust" stands alone among Goethe's works. What other compositions of the first class can he produce? Is it "Hermann und Dorothea"? That, no doubt, is very pretty and perfect. "Iphigenie" is very noble, "Tasso" very refined, "Götz" very spirited, but "Egmont" is somewhat disappointing, and almost all the other plays are unimportant, when they are not, like "Stella," extravagant. The pathos of "Werther" is almost as obsolete as that of Richardson; and is not "Wilhelm Meister" dull in a good many parts, nay, perhaps everywhere except where it is redeemed by the exquisite invention of Mignon, or by the vivacity of the disreputable Philine? Do not even Germans sometimes acknowledge that they cannot read the "Elective Affinities"? And who can make much of the Second Part of "Faust," or the Second Part of "Meister"? When we praise Shakspeare, we are not obliged to make so many abatements. Among his plays very few can be called failures, and a dozen at least are un-

*Sie jocht nur Fagen*



doubted masterpieces. But can Goethe hold his own even against Scott in abundance of imagination? To produce his few masterpieces how much effort was bestowed? What a task of self-culture did he impose upon himself? How many large designs did he conceive and abandon? What has become of his "Cæsar," of his "Mohammed," of his "Prometheus," of his "Ahasuerus," of his "Iphigenie in Delphi," of his "Nausicaa," of his great religious epic, "Die Geheimnisse," of his national epic on "Bernhard of Saxe Weimar," of his epic on "Wilhelm Tell," of his great trilogy of plays illustrative of the French Revolution? Of the trilogy we have a single play, "Die Natürliche Tochter," of some of the other works more or less considerable fragments, of some not a trace remains. Meanwhile Scott, taking life easily and making no parade of effort, pours out his poems, ballads, romances and novels without stint. He does not indeed rise to the level of "Faust"; but at least he finishes without delay whatever he begins, scarcely ever fails to satisfy both himself and the whole world; and though he had a life shorter by twenty years, has left behind him a greater mass of literature which is still amusing.

These reflections upon the posthumous vicissitudes of a great author on his way to immortality, lead perhaps naturally to the conclusion that the time is come to revise altogether the estimate of Goethe which we have received from the last generation. This, however, would be a ponderous task, and one which at this moment I have neither leisure nor health to undertake. All I can do is to reprint with certain alterations and additions some papers which I published about eight years ago. Reprinted, they will not make a complete book, but perhaps by treating Goethe as a whole, and furnishing a view of his literary performance which will at least be connected, they may make a slight essay towards that book on Goethe which seems to be required by the lapse of sixty years since his death.



## CHAPTER II.

### SOME LIMITATIONS OF HIS GENIUS.

I HAVE raised, as it were accidentally, the question whether great writers are to be ranked according to the number of the masterpieces they produce, for it must be admitted of Goethe that, though he lived long and produced much, he by no means enjoyed an easy and continuous triumph, and that we can scarcely rank a very large number of his works among the masterpieces of European literature. Nor is this to be explained simply by untoward circumstances in his life. Externally he was one of the most fortunate of artists. Had he not long life, easy circumstances, and most generous patronage? But let us consider the parallel case of military commanders. These are broadly distinguished into two classes. Some find an army ready made and disciplined. These are they who win with ease a long succession of victories. Those, on the other hand, who have their army to make advance on their

course through difficulties, have to balance defeat against victory, nay, lose in certain cases most of the battles they fight. We do not rank William III. or Washington among commanders according to the number of their victories. Is there not room sometimes for a similar distinction in literature?

It is often affirmed that a great poet is the outgrowth and flower of a great age, and this is true of a certain class of great poets. They live in the midst of great men, and within the rumour of great deeds; they use a language which has been gradually moulded to poetic purposes by poets who have been their precursors and whose fame they absorb. Appearing at the right moment, they reap the harvest which has been sown by others. Subjects are waiting for them, style and manner have been prepared, and a public full of sympathy and congeniality welcomes them. Such poets are not like William III. or Washington, but rather like Frederick, who inherited an unrivalled army created by his father, or like Napoleon, who wielded all the prodigious military force created and trained by the Revolution. Shakspeare may be said to belong to this class. He is the nor-

mal product of the Elizabethan age, which had accustomed Englishmen to great men and great deeds, and had filled them with great anticipations. Scott too had, in the first place, the advantage of models in whose steps it was safe to follow, since Shakspeare himself and the great novelists had created the style and smoothed the path for him, and since in two centuries of a flourishing English literature there had grown up a common understanding between the authors and the public. But this name of Scott suggests to us that there may be a heredity of a still more intimate kind in literary genius. The inexhaustible imagination which furnished out Scott's poems and romances was not the mere accident of a gifted nature or a fortunate time; it was a kind of personal inheritance. In the brain of the Borderer the wild life of his ancestors survived as a perennial spring of ballad, poetry and romance. That brain was like a haunted house upon which the strange deeds of a past generation have left their mark. He said himself that he had "a head through which a regiment of horse had been exercising ever since he was five years old." All the turmoil of the blood which is put to rest by the

security of a settled civilization, and which had lasted longer on the Border than in any other region so near the capital seats of culture—all the intense passions, primitive feelings, prejudices, and superstitions which make the stock of the romancer and ballad-writer—belonged to Scott, not simply because he was a genius, but mainly because he was a Borderer, because he was a Scott.

Often we can trace that in these cases poetry is a survival of conviction, belief in the second generation, hereditary sentiment. Some of those who watched Rossetti at his work thought they discovered that he did not regard his own imaginations seriously ; and, indeed, what other opinion can one form of the " Song of the Beryl," or the " Ballad of Sister Helen " ? Similarly, Mr. Henry James remarks of Hawthorne that it would be a great mistake to infer from the constant recurrence in his romances of the ideas of sin, retribution, and the stricken conscience, that Hawthorne himself was under the influence of such sombre ideas, the truth being that he was an easy-going, contented, and comfortable man. But Hawthorne's puritanic ancestors took these ideas seriously, and Rossetti's Italian an-

cestors<sup>1</sup> in like manner furnished the beliefs which in their secondary form suggested Rossetti's pictures and poems. Of all artists it is Scott who is richest in this kind of inherited sentiment. The shrewd, good-natured, sensible Scotch lawyer lives privately in a world of grandiose thoughts, opinions, sentiments, convictions, out of which he composes at his ease a whole literature ; and yet if you ask him what he thinks of these thoughts, opinions, sentiments, and convictions, he can only smile and evade the question. "Superstition," he says candidly, "is very picturesque, and I make it at times stand me in good stead, but I never allow it to interfere with interest or convenience." They were serious enough to his ancestors, those ideas of clannish devotion, of chivalry, of witchcraft, and demonology ; but to him they have come simply by inheritance. All he knows is that when he unlocks the ample chambers of his imagination he finds them there, that they work up into capital stories, if hardly fit for practical use, that

<sup>1</sup> "Such a man belonged to the sixteenth or perhaps the thirteenth century ; and in Italy, not in England."—"Recollections of D. G. Rossetti," T. Hall Caine, p. 270.

in short they are the old furniture of the house in which Nature has placed him.

Those poets create easily and abundantly who have a great fund of such inherited sentiment. But a poet is still more at his ease when the fund of sentiment he inherits is not obsolete to his reason, and when it is richly supplemented by strong and fresh sensations furnished by his own age. If to all this he add from his own genius an original power of insight into Nature and the universe—then we have the Shakspeare, who, though, as Goethe says of him, the life of whole centuries throbbed in his soul, yet is at the same time himself, since he is inspired by his own age as much as by the past and looks forward with eagerness to the future, and since he gives out from his original vitality as much as he receives, whether from his ancestors or from his contemporaries.

Now Goethe had not good fortune of this kind. He did not come into a great poetic inheritance. When we inquire whence came his imaginative wealth, we are obliged to conclude that, in the main, he must have collected it himself. So far from being the growth and representative of a great age, or the result in

literature of the silent nobleness of many generations of his countrymen, this great artist grew out of a people which had been sunk for a hundred years in an imaginative impotence as well as in a national and political nullity. The citizen of a declining imperial town, in a country where, as he himself complains, the citizen-class universally wanted personal dignity, in an age when Germany had fallen behind France and England, was destitute of literature of any high order, and had suffered its very language to fall into decay, and among the upper classes into disuse ; he found no poetical atmosphere about him, but had to struggle with a reign of prosaic mediocrity that reduced him to despair. The stagnation was no mere temporary evil. An Englishman who found, as Gray did, that he had fallen on a prosaic age, could shut himself up with Shakspeare and Milton, and forget the poverty that surrounded him in "the pomp and prodigality of Heaven !" But in Germany the poverty was of old standing ; Goethe saw no great poetic luminaries a century or two behind him. For Milton he had only Hoffmanswaldau, for Shakspeare only Gryphius. He rejects such models, and throughout his career we find him



leaning on no German predecessors but Hans Sachs, whose merit he rediscovered, and the old Middle German poet of Reineke Fuchs. And as Germany furnished him with no models, so she afforded few subjects. The Middle Ages were then little explored and little relished. With one vigorous effort Goethe rescues from oblivion the heroic name of Götz v. Berlichingen. But he can do no more. He makes an attempt to revive the memory of the hero of his patron's house, Bernhard of Saxe-Weimar, but, as we might expect, his imagination recoils in horror from "the woeful Iliad," so he calls it, of the Thirty Years' War. And what could the later period of Germany offer to him? That which makes history poetical—namely, nationality—was wanting there. Only in his own boyhood, when Fritz beat the French at Rosbach, did German history strike out a momentary spark of the fire which warms the poet.

The strange course which German affairs had taken for many centuries, and which had led to the ruinous disaster of the Thirty Years' War, produced pitiable effects upon the manners and ways of thinking of the people. There was a sort of dwarfishness—he himself calls it childish-



ness—in the generation before Goethe, and in his own generation there was a painful consciousness that almost all that constitutes manhood, that self-respect, independence, patriotism, had been lost and needed to be rediscovered. They felt the loss most keenly when they tried to write, for then they perceived that the true and right style in literature would not come to them. They could but helplessly imitate French models, and their imitations wanted the drawing-room elegance which made the chief charm of those models. When they tried to throw off the French yoke, and to speak with German frankness and simplicity, they found that instead of vigour they achieved only violence, and that their pathos turned into a miserable whine. It is this unfortunate style that our fathers ridiculed in the “Anti-Jacobin” (where the Stella of Goethe himself is ridiculed), and that still displeases us when we read many of his early pieces. To throw it off was all the more difficult, because of the want of native models of a better style. We, when we grew tired of Pope’s couplets, had only to revive an earlier taste; but Goethe and his contemporaries were forced to go to other countries for models. They began by calling

*Refinements*  
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in Shakspeare ; then they devoted themselves to the imitation of the ancients ; then came the turn of Calderon, Hafiz, and the Sakontala. German literature became rich beyond all other literatures in translations and adaptations ; but these, however precious, seemed always foreign and far-fetched acquisitions. We see the insurmountable difficulty that Goethe had to contend with, the want of the proper soil for poetry to grow in, and of the proper atmosphere to nourish it, when we remark that after all that he and others could do, German literature seems still, in comparison with other great literatures, somewhat pale, somewhat academic, and wanting in marked character. note

In these circumstances, it was impossible for Goethe to rival Shakspeare in achieving, with triumphant ease, masterpiece after masterpiece. He had to begin by making his way out of the slough to firm land. His first works could not but be crude, as, in fact, they are in part overstrained, mawkish, at times ridiculous. When this stage was passed, he would run the risk of seeming too little spontaneous, too much under the influence of foreign models. And throughout he would be under the necessity of putting

forth great effort, of schooling himself with the most assiduous vigilance ; and it was to be expected that he would sometimes fail, and that he would make many plans which he would afterwards find himself unable to execute. On the other hand, in this struggle with difficulties he might achieve certain great results which are not achieved by the happier genius. Peter the Great was not a very successful general ; he was terribly beaten by Charles XII. at Narva, terribly beaten by the Turks on the Pruth ; nevertheless, he created modern Russia. Something similar may be said of Goethe. "Werther" strikes us as morbid, the "Gross-Cophta" is tiresome ; but modern German literature is itself in a great degree the production of Goethe. There is much felicity in the compliment which Byron paid him when he dedicated "Sardanapalus" to "the illustrious Goethe, who has created the literature of his country and illustrated that of Europe." This may seem an exaggerated expression ; there are indeed few even of the greatest writers of whom it can be justly said that they created the literature of their country. Yet a very recent critic speaks almost as strongly when he writes of the

publication of the first collected edition of Goethe's works, of which the first five volumes appeared while he was in Italy, that is, between 1786 and 1788, and the remaining three in the following years :—

“It is a mere historic fact that since its appearance by far the greatest part of what till then had been considered, and at that time was still considered, genuine poetry, has continually fallen more and more into oblivion and what poetry appeared afterwards, written by others, stood so evidently under the influence of this new sunrise of beauty, that even the most powerful and original of the new poets, even Schiller, could not convey the full impression of his greatness and individuality till he had made a loving study of Goethe's poetry and genius, and so recognized his own difference from Goethe, and, at the same time, his deep agreement with him.”<sup>1</sup>

But we begin at the wrong end when we begin by speaking of the limitations which place Goethe at a disadvantage in comparison with one or two of the greatest names in the literature of the world. For us the first question is, What is the character of his genius? and the next, What is the compass of it?

<sup>1</sup> A. Schöll, “Goethe,” p. 123.

## CHAPTER III.

### CHARACTER AND COMPASS OF HIS GENIUS.

LET us try then to describe the kind and degree of the merit, which by every nation alike, and not by the Germans only, has been recognized in Goethe, and has been acknowledged to be such that it can never be forgotten. It would be possible to meet the lazy and superficial objection which I have been combating by an argument of the same superficial kind. By simply reckoning up Goethe's literary achievements, and comparing them, as an examiner might do, with those of other literary men, it may be shown that he is entitled, as it were, by marks to a place very near the top of the literary list. Besides the five or six consummate works which the world has agreed to admire, it may be affirmed that his lyrics, that is, his songs, ballads, and lyrical romances, are the best in the world. Heine at least, no bad judge of songs and no over-indulgent critic of Goethe, thought so. Further,

he may be called the greatest of all literary critics. And lastly, though he did not write formal essays, yet in the qualities of the essayist, in subtle and abundant observation of human life, in the number and value of his wise remarks and pregnant sentences, he is by far the greatest writer since Montaigne and Bacon. Even if we look no deeper, it is matter for astonishment that the most tender of lyrists, and one of the most inventive and sublime of dramatists, should be found discussing in "Wilhelm Meister" the duties of landowners, and the details of the management of a theatre, with a hard common-sense worthy of Johnson. In truth, however much men may differ about the merits of particular writings of Goethe, yet his literary greatness in general is so striking and so undeniable, that his fame is not in any way bound up with that of German literature. Those who do not relish the German genius in general, who find it wanting in clearness or manliness, must and do make an exception in Goethe's favour.

*quite*

But to get a clear view of Goethe's genius we must not compare him with others, nor show that he is equal to this author in this, and superior

to that author in that, nor must we try him by the common standard, and consider how often by that standard he succeeds and how often he fails. Rather we must understand how he differs from other writers, what an exceptional personality he has, and accordingly what an unusual standard he sets up for himself, and elects to be tried by. If the variety of his works is remarkable, their unity is more remarkable still ; it is unique. And if his power strikes us, if at times he is thrilling or overwhelming, his reserve, his reticence, his abstinence are still rarer than his power, and the level flats which at first disappoint us in his works are found to have an interest of their own.

I have spoken of the hereditary sentiment which makes so large a part of poetry, nay, which almost exclusively composes the poetry of many poets. A vast proportion of the poetry that is in the world is not serious. It expresses not what the writer really thinks and feels, but what haunts his brain, the fancies that come to him unbidden, and these are usually an echo of former beliefs. The serious thoughts of one age *walk*, as it were, as the poetry of the ages that follow. Quite different and much less in



quantity is the poetry that arises from a fresh original contemplation of Nature, the poetry which, though perhaps symbolical in form, the author is prepared to stand by as substantially true. There is not much in any age of such poetry, and it is seldom well received. For the public is much more under the dominion of hereditary sentiment than even the poets; the public desires to find in poetry the old common-places, and resents being cheated of them. But it is incomparably more valuable, and in fact is the vital element which alone keeps poetry alive. Wordsworth supplied it to England in Goethe's age. Now hereditary poetic sentiment, I have remarked, was wanting in Goethe's age and country. He was driven to be original, and being thus driven he became the avowed enemy of the conventional style, "the mortal enemy," as he loves to say, "of all empty verbiage." He takes poetry very seriously indeed. It is not enough for him that a poem is eloquent or high-sounding, or that it is popular; not enough even that it acts on the feelings, that it draws tears or excites enthusiasm. "Touch the heart!" he exclaims, "any bungler can do that!" "Ach! die zärtlichen Herzen, ein



Pfüscher vermag sie zu rühren." According to him poetry must be *true*, and he presses this principle with such rigour, that he seems to withdraw the art from popular judgment altogether. In short, all the work of reformation that was done in England by Wordsworth was done at the same time for Germany by Goethe. It was done not indeed more faithfully and in the face of less opposition ; but it was done with far wider intelligence, and with far profounder results. But that it should have been done at all, adds another great title to those high and various pretensions which Goethe puts forward. The Shakspeare was at the same time the Wordsworth. The great creator who imagined "Faust" and "Gretchen," who certainly could not say with Wordsworth "to freeze the blood I have no ready arts," is nevertheless as vigorous a reformer, and holds mere popularity in as sovereign contempt, as Wordsworth himself.

Wordsworth went without popularity, and it may strike us as natural that such a serious view of poetry should fail to commend itself to the multitude. To the multitude, indeed, it seems pedantic and almost self-contradictory ; for is

not poetry a pleasure, a natural recreation of the spirit, and what can be more perverse than to sophisticate it with reasoning? Was Goethe then unpopular also? The history of Goethe's reputation, and of his popularity in Germany, is long and interesting. I shall return to it. Meanwhile, it is to be said that certainly he suffered no such neglect as Wordsworth. Some of his works were vastly popular. He began with the greatest popular triumph that has been witnessed in German literary history. The reception of "Götz" and of "Werther," was similar to that of the "Lay of the Last Minstrel" and the first canto of "Childe Harold" in England; and as Goethe was the author of both books, his fame after their appearance was like that of Scott and that of Byron taken together. About 1775 he was by far the most popular poet, not only living, but that had lived, in Germany. Had Goethe been only a Scott, or only a Byron, or only a Scott and Byron in one, he would have taken his fortune at the flood, and poured out during the next twenty years a series of chivalrous romances, and another series of domestic tales of love and

suicide. Certainly at that time it could hardly have been expected that he would appear as a vigorous reformer of taste. Again, in the middle of his career, his "Hermann und Dorothea" was enthusiastically received, and of course the First Part of "Faust," which, in its complete form, did not come before the world till Goethe was fifty-nine years of age, had an unbounded popularity. But in the long intervals between these great triumphs he often passed into the background, was often almost forgotten, or was believed to have been spoiled for literature by the distractions of Court-life. Even when his fame was solidly established it became the custom to say, and Coleridge repeated it in England in one of the few passages in which Coleridge ever spoke of Goethe, that his writings did not, and never would, go to the heart of the German people as did those of Schiller, and that there was a certain coldness about them. Other critics outside Germany have charged him not only with coldness, but even with dulness; M. Schérer for example.

On this question of dulness we must distinguish. Goethe had a long old age. Perhaps we ought to consider that the "Westöstlicher

Divan," 1818, 1819, marks the close of his really vigorous authorship. But he lived and laboured for twelve years after this date. In the productions of those twelve years, no doubt much is languid, and we can only say in apology that the writer is old, and, especially when we speak of the Second Part of "Faust," that admiration and flattery have caused him to overrate the importance of his own writings. But if we find dulness in the writings of his vigorous period, it must be due to another cause. Dulness, when we attribute it to a writer, is after all a relative term ; it expresses only a want of correspondence between the mind of the writer and that of the reader. The writer finds something interesting, and therefore enlarges upon it, but the reader does not find it interesting. To *that* reader therefore *that* writer is dull ; but it is equally true that the reader seems dull to the writer. On which side the dulness actually resides depends upon the question, whether the matter which actually does not interest the reader ought to interest him. When Wordsworth's readers pish and psha at his stories of humble life, and protest that they take no interest in them, Wordsworth

Quote

answers : But you ought to take an interest ! It is not quite nor always, but it is partly and at times, the same with Goethe. What you call dulness he calls seriousness. Wilhelm's interminable description of the puppet-show in the first book of "Wilhelm Meister" puts ~~Marianne~~ we are told, to sleep ; this must mean that the writer knows well that he is writing what plain people will find dull, but to himself, since he is seriously inquiring into the philosophy of the drama, these things are interesting and seem to deserve close attention.

Of all imaginative writers Goethe is, perhaps, the most serious ; not the most solemn, nor the most passionate, nor the most earnest, but the most serious. He is absolutely bent upon grasping and expressing the truth ; he has no pleasure in any imaginations, however splendid or impressive, which he cannot feel to be true ; on the other hand, when he feels that he is dealing with truth he seems to care little, and sometimes to forget altogether, that it is not interesting. This is highly characteristic of the man who took almost as much interest in science as in poetry and could perform with infinite assiduity the tasks of a practical administrator. When w

consider indeed the methodical and practical seriousness of his character, the quality in fact which he believed himself to have inherited from his father, "des Lebens ernstes Führen" what surprises us is not so much that his writings should here and there be heavy, as that he should have continued through a long life to be a poet, and a highly imaginative and brilliant poet. What was rather to be predicted of such a nature was, that after a poetic youth he would find the serious business of his life either in science or in administration.

Literature is perhaps at best a compromise between truth and fancy, between seriousness and trifling. It cannot do without something of popularity, and yet the writer who thinks much of popularity is unfaithful to his mission; on the other hand, he who leans too heavily upon literature breaks through it into science or into practical business. Goethe was often in danger of seeing his art thus give way under him; when he says that but for Schiller's sympathy he does not know what would have become of him, he seems to mean that he was on the point, at the moment when Schiller came to the rescue, of abandoning poetry for science. He is always



so near to reality, and examines it with such penetrating eyes, that it is a problem how he can remain a poet ; for is poetry possible without something of illusion ? Yet he remains a poet to the last. Business could not make him dull, nor science matter-of-fact ; even when old age was added to both, he might lose something of his force, but his imagination remained warm and glowing. The Second Part of "Faust" may show signs of decay, but assuredly it is not prosaic. On the point of disappearance, this great orb of song is surrounded by a fantastic pomp of form and colour. Nor, on the other hand, does he ever become a mere cold realist. If he accumulates details, it is not in the spirit of a Defoe, or for the mere pleasure of producing illusion—for the generalizing tendency, so far from being weak, is almost excessive in him ; but because, like the inductive philosopher, he is eager for facts and desires to have the broadest basis for his conclusions.

This taste for facts is not only to be perceived in the minuteness of particular descriptions, but in the whole character of his plays, novels and poems, and it explains how they may often seem dull, and sometimes may really be so. Serious-

ness and dulness may easily in literature be mistaken for each other. What is uninteresting as fiction may be highly interesting when it is regarded as fact; and in Goethe's works much more is fact and much less is mere fiction than the reader is apt to assume. His most famous work, "Faust," is not that which is most characteristic of his genius. He there revels in quaint and audacious invention, quite contrary to the habit, contrary even to the cherished principles, of his mature life. The truth is that "Faust," though it was finished and published late, is in its conception a youthful work. He was long disposed to regard the commencement he had early made as among the crudities which in his second period he had outgrown. For many years it lay untouched, and when, in the closing years of the eighteenth century, he turned once more to "these northern phantoms," as he calls them, it is with misgiving and repugnance. But a tide of mediævalism set in, by which, in spite of himself, he was carried away, and the First Part of "Faust," published in 1808, was Goethe's concession to the romanticist fashion—a sort of opportunist abandonment of his mature convictions and return to an

Faust

quote



earlier style which he had deliberately renounced. Many misconceptions of Goethe have resulted from the habit of estimating him by this exceptional work. In his other works it is a general rule that they are founded in a remarkable degree upon fact. "Götz" is a dramatized memoir, so is "Clavigo." "Werther" was constructed by combining what had passed between Goethe and Lotte Buff with the circumstances of Jerusalem's suicide. "Tasso" is a picture of Court-life at Weimar; and in the relations of Tasso to the Princess, we see a reflexion of those of Goethe to Frau v. Stein. In "Wilhelm Meister," it is known that the "Confessions of a Beautiful Soul" are substantially the memoirs of Fräulein v. Klettenberg, to which Goethe has made some additions. Much of this novel also is autobiographical. In the first book there are many pages which might almost as well have appeared in "Dichtung und Wahrheit." The very name of the hero is explained<sup>1</sup> when we find Goethe in his early period and

<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm says, "His friend Shakspeare, whom he had great pleasure in acknowledging also for his godfather, and liked all the better to hear himself called Wilhelm."  
—L. J. book iv. chap. iii.

when his enthusiasm for Shakspeare was at its height, harping upon William as the name of his guardian genius. When we find his songs, in like manner, suggested in almost every case by some real incident and some real feeling, we begin to perceive that Goethe regards poetry and literature generally in a way peculiar to himself. He brings it into a much closer connexion than other writers with actual life and experience. We perceive the full force of his own statement, that all his works, taken together, made up a great confession. With this clue in their hands, the commentators have traced the origin of a vast number of incidents and characters which otherwise would have been held, as a matter of course, to have been invented by Goethe. Thus in the little play, "Die Geschwister," we meet again with the Frau v. Stein. The story of "Stella" has been traced to the circle of Jacobi. In "Wilhelm Meister" numberless identifications have been made. The prince in whose honour the players perform the masque of "Peace" is Prince Henry of Prussia, the pedantic count is Count Werther, the countess is the sister of Minister Stein, and so on without end. Such identifications are unimportant in themselves, but they throw light

upon the working of Goethe's imagination. They show us in what a singular degree real life furnished him not only with material, but with inspiration. He has himself told us that his only way of getting rid of the experiences which pressed upon him, was to put them in a book. Many poets set a wide gulf between the real world and the world of their imaginations; most, perhaps, receive from life one or two strong and fresh impressions, which they afterwards mix with a large amount of traditional commonplace; few but regard reality as an influence more or less adverse, more or less disenchanting. To Goethe, reality is almost the sole source of poetry; in his works so much poetry, so much experience.

Only a very great genius can venture thus to attach himself to facts, and the greatest genius will not always handle such a method successfully. He who habitually turns his own life into poetry, who lays before the public whatever has chanced to make a deep impression upon himself, will at times—especially when, like Goethe he is not writing for a livelihood—write what cannot possibly be interesting to others; and Goethe has written many pages tiresomely precise, which no one, if they had been written by

any ordinary writer, would care to read, and many more which, if not wholly unimportant, seem at least not important enough. More usually he is not in reality dull; but he is, in his prose writings at least, what those who read lightly and for mere amusement call dull. Such readers can in general make little, for instance, of "Wilhelm Meister," a novel with few incidents and only one or two strongly-marked characters—"a menagerie of tame cattle," Niebuhr called it—but full of discussion, strangely laboured and minute, on matters more or less practical. It is as uninteresting to most plain people as Wordsworth's "Prelude," and much more prosaic. Goethe has not in this instance made a mistake; he has only given the rein to his realistic and serious genius. But the majority of mankind are not serious, and if they enjoy realism, it is not realism of this kind. He aims at no illusion, and his minute descriptions are seldom humorous. He appears as a philosophic realist, studying life that he may become wise, and describing it that he may make his readers wise. Alas, for ninety-nine out of every hundred of them!

If he had not once or twice, especially in "Faust," had the good luck to light upon a fable interesting to all the world, and so once or

*seriousness, philosophical realist*  
*→ reason for dullness sometimes*

twice charmed, like Shakspeare, the many and the few at once, Goethe would have remained, at least outside Germany, a writer little known, and only prized by a curious reader here and there. As it is, his universal fame brings into notice pieces which have no superficial attractions, and makes men study closely other pieces which they would have passed over lightly. Once admitted as a classic, he reaps all the benefit of his seriousness. For his works bear examination if only they can attract it. Those who read them at all will read them over and over. Here is literature which nourishes; here are books which may become bosom friends. Here are high views put forward modestly, grand and large ideas, which will not disappoint those who try to reduce them to practice; precepts which are not merely earnest, but, what is so much rarer, serious.

He makes his Tasso say of Clorinda, Armida, Tancred, and the rest, what sounds strangely when applied to them, "I know they are immortal, for they *are*." (Ich weiss es, sie sind ewig, denn sie *sind*.) Of Goethe's own characters this might very fairly be said, and it is a remarkable saying. He, one of the great poetic creators, hardly believes in what is called the

creative imagination at all. According to him, if a character is to be such as will bear examination, it must not be invented, but transferred from real life. The very play from which the maxim is taken illustrates it. Tasso at Ferrara is in reality Goethe at Weimar, not indeed Goethe as he was, for he had precisely the balance of character which Tasso wants, but as he was tempted to be, as he feared in the first years of his Court-life to become. How consistently in all his works he acted on the same maxim his commentators have shown, and those who assume to be his critics should be careful to remember. Perhaps Goethe does not impress us quite as Shakspeare does, whose plays are so full of latent thought, who reveals so much on close examination which is wholly unsuspected by the ordinary reader, that an experienced student of him gives up fault-finding in despair. Goethe, on the other hand, seems quite capable of making mistakes ; still there is such a fund of reality and of actual fact in his so-called fiction that criticism of it may easily be rash. Thus Coleridge, in the curious passage which is his sole manifesto on the subject of the greatest writer of his age, finds fault with

enlightenment  
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Shakspeare  
and  
Goethe



the character of "Faust," which he calls dull and meaningless. It is indeed not quite easy to understand "Faust," as it is not easy to understand "Hamlet." But Coleridge himself more earnestly than anyone forbids us to lay the blame of the obscurity of Hamlet's character on Shakspeare. And there is at least a probability that Faust's character too will bear examination, because Faust is no mere imaginary being, but is in fact Goethe himself. If inconsistency has crept in, it is the consequence of a questionable practice which Goethe had of keeping his designs so long by him that his hand altered during the progress of the execution.

Goethe then is not in the same class as Scott, first because he wants the rich fund of traditional sentiment which came to Scott by right of birth ; secondly, because he has a vastly more abundant supply of what may be called new poetry—that is, poetry derived at first hand from Nature, which is as a spring chillingly cold, yet so pure and refreshing ! He is, indeed, not like Scott, but rather like Wordsworth and Shakspeare compounded together. But before our conception of him can be complete, even in

trans.  
Goethe

complete  
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outline, we must recognize another great quality that he possesses.

Goethe is a perfect Solomon for proverbs; they pour from him in floods. He has such an abundance of them to communicate, that he is often at a loss where to find room for them, and puts them recklessly into the mouths of personages who cannot reasonably be credited with such a rare talent for generalization—the practical Therese, the tender and unhappy Ottilie. The knack of coining pregnant sentences is so remarkable in him, that when we see it so strangely combined with a lyrical talent and a love of natural science, we are irresistibly reminded of the ancient description of Solomon, which says that he “spake of trees, from the cedar which is in Lebanon to the hyssop which springeth out of the wall; also he spake three thousand proverbs, and his songs were a thousand and five.” He is a sage as truly as he is a poet, and never, unless in Shakspeare, has such another combination of the generalizing with the imaginative faculty been witnessed. But when we examine his wisdom, we find that it is much more than a mere instinctive habit of observation combined with an unrivalled power



of expression. His sentences are not mere detached fragments, or momentary flashes, of insight. They are the coherent aphorisms of a sort of practical philosophy. He is not merely a sage, he is even a philosopher. His wisdom though it is not presented in scholastic form has unity about it, and is calculated to influence, nay, has deeply influenced, philosophic students. We have had, in recent times, several literary men, who, without being philosophers in the academic sense, yet claim to have something to say and to contribute something original to philosophic discussion. And the most specialized philosophers may well listen with respect, as Mill listens to Wordsworth, to men of exceptional sensibility, who see the universe in a light peculiar to themselves, even when such men are without learning, and cannot command the proper philosophic expression for their thoughts. Goethe looks at the discussions of the school from the outside, and regards them rather with derision than respect, as the readers of "Faust" do not need to be reminded. He continued through life to regard the new systems which sprang up around him with something of the same sceptical indifference which he had

*practical  
philosophy*

*philosopher*  
shown in youth to the Collegium Logicum. Of all the great philosophers, perhaps, only Spinoza produced really much impression on him. Yet he is a philosopher in a higher degree than any other literary man, and has produced a deeper impression than any literary man upon thinkers and students. Though in the modern sense we hesitate to call him a philosopher, yet in the old sense, and in the highest sense of the name, few of the recognized philosophers have nearly so good a title to it as he. For to him philosophy is not merely a study, but a life; it is not summed up in thinking and classifying and constructing systems, but extends to all departments of activity. And it would be difficult to name the philosopher who has devoted himself with more methodical seriousness than Goethe to the problem of leading, and then of teaching, the best and most desirable kind of life. He conceives the problem in its largest possible extent. From prudential maxims in the style of Johnson, he rises to more general precepts on the choice of a vocation, pouring out a fund of wisdom peculiarly his own on the mistakes men make about their own aptitudes; then he dwells more

particularly on the life of the artist, a subject till then scarcely noticed by moralists, but treated by Goethe with the greatest comprehensiveness; then he rises to morality and religion. On all subjects alike he is serious; on all subjects perfectly unfettered. He has the advantage of a vast experience, for he has practised many arts, tasted almost every literature, informed himself about every science, turning away only from quite abstract studies, mathematics, logic, and metaphysics; and beside all that can be acquired from study, society, and travel, he has managed a theatre and governed a small State. He has the coolness and shrewdness of the most practical men; but he has none of the narrowness, none of the hardness, to which practical men are liable. On the contrary, he is full of sympathy, and he has also infinite good-humour.

Had Goethe appeared as a thinker and philosopher only, he would have been similar to Bacon. Can we say that he would have been at all inferior? His observation extends over wider provinces of life; he is more honest, more kindly. His faculty of style is at least equally great. There is a certain similarity too

in the scientific pretensions of the two men. Both professed to be discoverers, and the claims of both have been denied; but what seems clear is that both had a prophetic sense of the tendency of science, a profound and just instinct of new scientific developments at hand.

I do not speak here of what may be questionable in Goethe's speculations. I do not raise the question whether his influence may not have been in some respects harmful. The question in this chapter is simply of the extent or magnitude of his influence.

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What an imposing total do we arrive at if we add together all the qualities that have been enumerated! How large an outline does his picture require! The creator of the literature of his country, the author of the freshest lyrics, and of one of the grandest dramas, the high-minded literary reformer, disdainful of popularity, who kept his works free from rhetorical falseness, the unrivalled critic and observer; this man is also the teacher, and at the same time the example, of a great system of practical philosophy.

Scarcely any man has been to any nation all that Goethe has been to Germany. When we

think what he did, we are irresistibly led to inquire what he was. He, himself, in "Dichtung und Wahrheit," showed that the key to his writings is to be found in his biography. His countrymen have taken the hint with German docility, and followed it up with German industry. It has been said that the life of Louis XIV. might almost be written from day to day, and we begin to know Goethe's life with the same minuteness. The revelation certainly heightens our sense of his greatness. If we look merely at the fulness of his life, at the quantity of action, sensation, and thought comprised in it, if we try merely to reckon up how much work he did, we are lost in amazement, and admire more than ever the rare quality, the freshness and exquisiteness of so much of that work. Our conception of Goethe is completed when we add to all the numerous and various excellences shown in his writings, that in the man himself as he lived and moved, there was a spring of vitality so fresh ("a heart as strong as a mountain river"), that the mere story of his life without any help from strange adventures, the mere narrative of his undertakings, travels, plans, conversations, loves, and friendships, is fascinating.

## CHAPTER IV.

### GOETHE'S AGE AND CONTEMPORARIES.

*James and public in England*

THERE has always been, and there is to this day, in spite of the Biography of Lewes, a certain vagueness in the English mind with respect to the literary career of Goethe. His name and fame were familiar to us for a remarkably long time before we made any close acquaintance with his personality. Though he lived almost sixty years after his "Werther" created a rage all over Europe, yet our public scarcely formed a distinct notion of him till after he was dead. In English books of poetical criticism, even those which we are only just ceasing to regard as authorities, his name is strangely absent where we might most expect to find it. Macaulay and Hallam must have known how it was regarded abroad, and certainly Macaulay had read "Wilhelm Meister" and "Faust," but both these critics are on very distant bowing terms with Goethe. When they

make those solemn critical awards in which that school delighted, arranging the poets of all ages in order of merit, it is to be observed that they silently exclude Goethe from the competition. Thus, when Hallam pronounces of Spenser that he is the third name among the poets of England, and has been surpassed by Dante alone among foreign poets, he may indeed very possibly have meant to put the author of the "Faery Queene" above the author of "Faust," as Lamb plainly prefers Marlowe's Dr. Faustus to the Faust of Goethe. But it seems more likely that Goethe was not in Hallam's mind when he passed this judgment. Macaulay, too, does, it is true, once quote Goethe in passing, but he never dwells upon him, nor is it easy to imagine Macaulay, more than Hallam, giving Goethe a place among the great poetic names of the past. More remarkable than the silence of Macaulay and Hallam is the silence of Coleridge, which was, in fact, the main hindrance to Goethe's reputation in England. In all the writings of Coleridge, I know only of a single passage in which the merits of Goethe are discussed. This is puzzling. It was the peculiar mission of Coleridge to make England

*Coleridge*



acquainted with German genius and thought. We can scarcely suppose that he overlooked Goethe. At the time when he first attended to German literature he must have become acquainted with Goethe's writings. In 1798, when Coleridge was in Germany, a large fragment of "Faust" had been before the public for several years, and "Götz" and "Werther" were already nearly a quarter of a century old; nor was that one of the moments in which Goethe was inactive, or had suffered his name to pass out of the public mind. On the contrary, at the very time when the young Englishman was curiously watching from Göttingen one of the most singular fermentations recorded in literary history, Goethe was reaching his zenith. His alliance with Schiller had lately been formed. "Wilhelm Meister" and "Hermann und Dorothea" were just launched, or being launched, into the world. But even if by some accident the phenomenon escaped Coleridge's notice at the time, yet, in the thirty years that followed, did he never become alive to the imposing greatness of it? In the mirror which he holds up to Germany, Goethe's figure is not to be seen. We see there Lessing, Kant, Schiller,



and Schelling, but not Goethe. And yet several of Coleridge's contemporaries outside Germany saw what Coleridge could not see. Mme. de Stael pronounced Goethe "le poëte de l'Allemagne, le philosophe, l'homme de lettres vivant dont l'originalité et l'imagination sont les plus remarquables." Scott translated "Götz v. Berlichingen," and he habitually spoke of Goethe as his master. At a later time Shelley translated the "Prolog im Himmel." Byron paid him homage, "as a vassal to his liege lord." Only Coleridge, the professed literary critic, the recognized authority on German literature, knows nothing of him! He brings to us information about several interesting and remarkable writers; he can tell of the clear style and masterly logic of Lessing, of the glowing poetical eloquence of Schiller, of the great philosophic genius of Kant. Has it escaped his notice that in this throng of new writers there is one to whom almost all the others look up as to their Musæus, one "whose fame over his living head like heaven was bent"—a man of unique personality, belonging not to Germany only, but to the world?

Certainly it did not escape his notice. It

would have been strange indeed if a Coleridge had failed to appreciate the songs of Goethe, or if he, of all our poets the most familiar with the dangers of philosophic speculation, if he who wrote "Dejection," had been unable to appreciate "Faust." But the one passage in which he does speak his mind about Goethe betrays in every line that he thought of him what he could not but think. It has the character of an apology, and is expressed in a constrained style which marks embarrassment. "The style of 'Wilhelm Meister' is excellent; the songs in 'Faust' and the characters of Mephistopheles and Gretchen are excellent." He has been advised to translate 'Faust,' but has had reasons for not doing so. One is that he doubted whether it became his moral character to translate what in parts is vulgar and blasphemous. Moreover, he has himself planned a poem on a similar subject. Michael Scott was to have been his Faust, and he had had ideas and inventions, better, he thinks, than anything in 'Faust.'" Probably Coleridge did really feel that kind of dread which the Stolbergs in Germany felt of the so-called heathenism of Goethe. Probably he shrank from the responsibility of

Coleridge?!

introducing into England an influence at once so powerful and so questionable. Goethe's thoughts had been originally dropped into a soil ploughed up by scepticism, both religious and moral, and Coleridge might not unreasonably consider them ill-adapted for England, where the current was at that very time setting strongly towards a positive system of belief. But a profound admiration, and almost awe, curiously mixed with a kind of envy, breaks through his reticence.

Had Coleridge translated "Faust," "Hermann und Dorothea," and the songs; had he seen his way to bring Goethe's chief works as a whole before the English public, which he could have done with more subtlety and discrimination than Carlyle, and twenty years earlier, we should have been further advanced in the knowledge of Goethe now than we actually are. In particular, we should have escaped an illusion which is caused by the fact that his writings were first studied by us so long after they were written. It was near the centenary of his birth when we first fell under his influence. Not only did we see his works, as we see all foreign works, divorced from the circumstances which produced them, but we listened to him for the first time

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Knowledge of Goethe in England  
delayed

almost in the middle of the nineteenth century, and scarcely remarked that the voice to which we listened spoke to us from the eighteenth. The speaker seemed to be the old man of Weimar, the old man who had so lately occupied the literary throne. It was in the later thirties and in the forties that we studied him, and then it was fresh in our remembrance that he had noticed Carlyle, and written verses to Mrs. Carlyle, that he had flattered Scott, and translated passages from Byron. His name was associated with the literary celebrities of the time of our George IV. He seemed almost a later poet than Byron, since he not only outlived Byron, but in his poetical philosophy was held to have gone beyond him, so that those who suffered from the Byronic fever were advised to take Goethe as an antidote. Moreover, the Second Part of "Faust," in mere compass the greatest of his poems, and not so manifestly a failure that it could not be represented by some critics as the greatest also in importance, was actually not finished till 1831, and not published till later still, so that Goethe appeared, in some sense, as an active contemporary of Tennyson, Bulwer, and Macaulay.

quote

This was an illusion. Goethe was not really a writer of that age, nor even of the age before. He is not properly a contemporary even of Scott, much less of Tennyson. The roll of his really important works was made up soon after Scott began his career. He is in fact, properly speaking, a writer of the eighteenth century. But even this statement is not strong enough. It requires an effort fully to realize at once the great length of his career and the great influence and fame of his earliest works. As I have said, Goethe was not at his rising, but about at his noon, when Coleridge was in Germany, and that was earlier by seven years than the first great success of Scott. If his zenith was so far back, how far must we travel to find his commencement? We must go beyond the first appearance of Cowper and Crabbe, beyond the publication of Johnson's "Lives of the Poets" (1781), or Miss Burney's "Evelina" (1778). This brings us to the age of Goldsmith, and it is in this period that we find the first astonishing successes of Goethe. Goldsmith died in 1774, which is the year in which all Germany was shedding tears over "Werther." But "Götz" had appeared the

year before that, and had also created a great sensation. Even "Werther" and "Götz" are not absolutely the earliest writings of Goethe; they are only the writings which first made his name celebrated. His essay on German architecture had appeared in 1772, and among the poems now included in his works some were written as early as 1765.

It excites astonishment that a writer who finished a great and imposing poetical work three years after Lord Tennyson's name came before the public, should have written the most successful book of the year which witnessed the death of Goldsmith. But of this long period, if Goethe's fame belongs principally to the latter half, his character and genius belong principally to the former. He has influenced the nineteenth century and is influencing it, but he belongs to the eighteenth. And not even to the last years of the eighteenth. He is not one of those great men whom we often suppose, rather mistakenly perhaps, to have been inspired and formed by the impulse of the French Revolution. The French Revolution fell in the middle of his career, when his apprenticeship (Lehrjahre) was over, when his principal works were planned and

quote

disparity of fame and genius  
in time

distorted conception of G.



half written. It disturbed instead of inspiring him. As a subject for poetry, he could never handle it successfully, except when in "Hermann und Dorothea" he uses, as it were, the remote thunder of it to heighten the idyllic serenity of the scene. Of the successful works which he published in the nineteenth century, the chief—viz., the First Part of "Faust"—was not only planned and in great part written in the eighteenth, but in conception it is one of the earliest of his works, almost as early as "Götz." We sometimes hear "Faust" spoken of as the great characteristic poem of the nineteenth century, but the ideas most characteristic of the nineteenth century are somewhat strangely absent from it. Goethe himself, in the impressive dedication, describes the effort which he made in completing "Faust" to revive the feelings and fancies of his earliest youth. That effort carried him back to days when the French Revolution was undreamed of, far back into the old *régime* of Europe, the days of Maria Theresa, Frederick, and Louis XV., the days when Voltaire and Rousseau were still reigning in the world of literature. And generally in his later works, with the exception of "Wilhelm

Ten's Re-  
hension

Faust -  
young war

Meister's Wanderjahre," the peculiar spirit of the nineteenth century is studiously excluded, and the train of thought is imperturbably pursued which would have been natural to us all if no French Revolution and no nationality movement had occurred to alter the aspect of everything.



## CHAPTER V.

### LITERARY PHASES OF GOETHE.

THUS our conception of Goethe is distorted by the illusion which makes him seem to us more modern than he is. But it is also rendered indistinct by our imperfect knowledge of the development which his genius underwent. Few writers passed through so many phases. He did not write in his old age as he had written in the Napoleonic time, nor in the Napoleonic time as he had written at the close of the eighteenth century, nor after his visit to Italy as he had written before it, nor after he settled at Weimar as he had written in his native city of Frankfurt. Of this succession of phases we have no doubt some notion—we know that the Second Part of "Faust" belongs to the old age and "Werther" to the period of immaturity—but our notion is not sufficiently distinct. Yet Goethe is an artist, and to say this is to say that a true knowledge of him, as of other artists,

consists mainly in an accurate discrimination of the phases or periods of his genius.

Let us begin this discrimination of periods by marking off the period of old age. A collected edition of his works appeared between 1806 and 1808, and this collection caused the want of a biography of the poet to be felt. He undertook to be his own biographer, and the chief part of "Dichtung und Wahrheit" appeared between the years 1811 and 1814. We may regard this as the winding up of his literary life, since the works which appeared later, with the exception of the "West-östlicher Divan," contained little that was valuable which had not been composed at an earlier time. When a period of nearly twenty years has thus been assigned to the old age, there remain about forty years for the period of active genius. It is this period which it is important properly to subdivide.

There is this difference between the periods of a painter and of a writer such as Goethe was, that the painter is always painting, whereas the writer is often otherwise employed, and may even for long years abandon writing altogether. Goethe to be sure was almost always producing, but he was by no means always publishing ; he

was not dependent on his authorship. He began life as Doctor Goethe, an advocate at the Frankfurt bar, where he actually practised for about three years. Afterwards he became an official in the service of the Duke of Weimar, and may be said to have been for about ten years his Prime Minister. In 1786, when he was thirty-seven years old, he obtained a long leave of absence and spent two years in Italy. On his return to Weimar he did not resume general administrative business, but reserved to himself the department of culture, and was from this time forward Education Minister. These cares were enough to fill the life of an ordinary man, even of an ordinary able man. It was, as it were, out of office hours that he played the part of the greatest, most original, most various, and most consummate writer of his time. Accordingly his literary life falls into short periods of activity separated by longer periods of comparative inaction, reappearances, as it were, after intervals of retirement. The plan of it is less simple than that of Shakspeare or Scott. We have to deal not with an uninterrupted series of plays, as in the case of Shakspeare, nor with a series of poems followed by a

*Goethe*

series of romances and novels, as in the case of Scott. Goethe makes several pauses and several new departures ; there are, as it were, several Goethes, who are separated from each other by intervals of time.

Perhaps we may distinguish three appearances of Goethe in German literature.

First, there is that early appearance, now more than a century behind us, when he wrote "Götz" and "Werther." This appearance comes to an end when he is summoned in 1775 to Weimar, when he passes into a new world, and undertakes new duties.

For about a dozen years from this time he is comparatively inactive in literature, and might seem to have lost ground. At least he had not followed up, as a bookseller would have advised him to do, the astonishing hits he had made at the beginning of his career. But about the year 1788, at the time when he was in Italy, he began a new period of activity and success, which may be said to have lasted till the end of the eighteenth century. This second Goethe is extremely different from the first. He does not now take the public by storm. He is called artificial, and cold ; sometimes he is called by

Quote  
appearance  
in  
more

even worse names; only one of the works of this period, "Hermann und Dorothea," was received with general enthusiasm. But upon thinking men this second Goethe produces gradually an effect more profound than was perhaps ever produced in any age by a contemporary poet.

Just at the close of the eighteenth century he falls once more into the background. Schiller steps forward, and for some years occupies the stage in such a striking manner as to draw attention away from every other actor. There is at this time no rivalry, but the most intimate accord, between him and Goethe; but in these years he pours forth his dramas in such rapid succession, and these dramas are so imposing, so much more calculated to impress the general public than the works of the second Goethe had been, that he could not but have, and had a right to have, the stage to himself for a time. When he passed away, in 1805, much was altered. Under a number of powerful influences which all worked together, the influences of Kant and Fichte, and those of Goethe and Schiller themselves, new literary movements had begun, and the fashion of literature was changing. Roman-

ticism had set in, which, though it had started with a great profession of reverence for Goethe, yet led the public taste away from the severe principles of his second period. He becomes aware of a certain degree of reaction against his influence.

Goethe, however, was able in some measure to reconcile himself to this reaction. He now makes a third appearance, and this time in some sense as a romanticist writer. To this period belong the "Elective Affinities," the "West-östlicher Divan," and another work more important than either. There was a certain resemblance between Romanticism and that earlier movement in which the first Goethe had taken the lead. To become a Romanticist, therefore, Goethe had only to go back to his youth. It happened that of the designs which had occupied him in that now remote period, one had never been completed. It was mediæval, like "Götz," and as mystically, as awfully sombre as any of those plays of Calderon which the new school was now reviving. This was "Faust." And when thus he returned for a moment to the style of his youth, he had again the astonishing success that had hailed his



youthful efforts. "Faust" stood out at once as the great work of Goethe, and the fame of it went round the world.

We may almost consider the autobiography, which followed so soon, as belonging in some degree to Goethe's romanticist works; for it tells only of the first Goethe. It does not describe the austere, cold, second period, but only the enthusiastic days which Romanticism seemed to have brought back again, the days in which he wrote "Götz" and planned "Faust."

Such, roughly, are the three Goethes. The first is best described as a Shakspearian, for Goethe in the seventies of the eighteenth century was mainly under the influence of Shakspeare, and appeared to his countrymen as the leader of the Shakspearian school. The second is a rigid classicist, writes plays and idyls on the Greek model, narrative poems in hexameters, and elegiacs after Propertius and Martial. The third is, to some extent, a romanticist. He has dropped his classical models and wanders after Calderon and Hafiz. He adapts to the romanticist fashion the Shakspearian sketches of his youth.

But though in this latter period there was



some concession to a reigning fashion, yet it is not to be supposed that Goethe abandoned that devotion to the Greek ideal upon which, in the second period, he had based his art. "Faust" itself proves his fidelity to it, if we bear in mind how that work may naturally have been regarded by Goethe himself. Our minds dwell almost exclusively on the First Part, and because we take little interest in the Second Part, which strikes us as prolix and fantastic, we unconsciously assume that in Goethe's mind, too, it was of secondary interest; one of those afterthoughts by which an artist, who has had a happy idea, hopes to make it serve him a second time. But the old story which Goethe had undertaken to dramatize said that Faust's compact with the fiend was for Helen of Greece. Now, as Helen does not appear in the First Part, and does appear in the Second; moreover, as the Second Part is more than half as long again as the First, and is a regular play in five acts, whereas the First is only a series of scenes; it would seem that to Goethe the First Part appeared rather as the introduction to a work than as the work itself. And if we think of the two parts together, as Goethe thought of

*Faust I = mere introduction  
to Faust II*

them, we see that Helena is intended to be, as it were, the central figure, the Beatrice of this new Divine Comedy. Now Helena is none other than the Greek ideal, and thus we see that the whole work treats of the return of the modern mind to ancient classical ways of thinking. Even in his third period then, though he appeared partly as a romanticist, Goethe is at heart a classicist. In this instance, indeed, it was not any compromise that made him appear otherwise, but only the accident that the introduction to his work was infinitely more successful than the work itself. The introduction, that is, the First Part, contains some of the brightest inventions of his youth, treated when his style was absolutely at the height of its distinction and felicity. It is throughout the work of his vigorous period, while at the same time it spoke to the popular mind. The Second Part is a compound of the languor of his old age with the coldness of his second period, and thus speaks in a drowsy tone of things which only the few understand.

*quint*

*cur*

As I have remarked, Goethe sometimes kept designs so long by him that when the work appeared it was difficult to say to what period

it belonged, since it bore the marks of several periods. This remark applies especially to "Faust." Of this work some scenes may have been written as early as 1773, but the whole was not completed till the middle of 1831. In other words, he had the poem in hand not much less than sixty years. Even the First Part took him more than thirty years. In "Faust," therefore, every phase of Goethe is to be traced somewhere. It is only in general and roughly that we can say that the First Part belongs to the first and third periods, and the Second Part to the second period, and to the old age.

"Wilhelm Meister" is another work to which the same remark applies. He kept it by him (I speak only of the *Lehrjahre*) more than twenty years. By observing this fact we discover how to place it in our classification. By the date of its publication it belongs to the second period, of which indeed it is the principal work. And yet it is not in classical form. The truth is, it is the work of transition, the work in which Goethe records in what way and through what stages he passed out of his first into his second period. The earlier part of the novel may almost be said to belong to the first

*First production  
60 years*

*Wilhelm Meister  
Lehrjahre  
20 years*

period, and throughout the prominence which is given to Shakspeare is a note of the first period. But Mignon's figure and Mignon's song draw our thoughts more and more towards Italy; Greek statues float before us; and at last, in the eighth book, we are introduced to the Hall of the Past, where Goethe himself, disguised as the Uncle, stands in the midst of a world of Greek art. Here we are in the midst of the classicism of the second period. Here is preached to us the culture-gospel, of which the principal maxim is *gedenke zu leben*—study to live, instead of *memento mori*—study to die.

Thus, "Wilhelm Meister" runs parallel to "Faust," if we think of the two Fausts together. Wilhelm's apprenticeship corresponds in prose to the course of Faust as depicted in poetry. Both move out of what is described as a Gothic confusion into the antique world. The one rests in the culture-gospel, the other marries Helen of Greece. We have here a sort of clue to the vast and various labyrinth of Goethe's writings. What may be the value of this fundamental Goethian maxim I do not inquire in this chapter, which deals with the classifica-

| quote

tion of Goethe's writings, not with the substance of them.

So far, then, Goethe's progress appears to consist in a gradual estrangement from everything Gothic, or, as he expresses it, northern, and in a conversion to classicism. It is a progress which causes him to part company with the public for which he writes. They like what is Gothic, and are cold to what is Hellenic. They receive with enthusiasm his youthful works, but are cold to "Tasso," and not more than respectful to "Iphigenie;" they like "Faust" so far as it is Gothic, but turn away from it when it begins to become Hellenic. But is this a complete account of the matter? We know that Goethe in his later life smiled at "Werther." Did he simply and merely repent of all that he had written in his first period, and wish it unwritten? Or did he only modify his early views, and perhaps add something to them? It is the more important to arrive at a clear view on this head, because the first period of Goethe, upon which he would seem to have afterwards turned his back, is in its effect upon the literature both of Germany and the world scarcely less great and striking than the second.

to be  
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in Gothic  
Hellenic to  
Classicism

Ric Tass  
Hellenic Tass

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Tass

## CHAPTER VI.

### IMPORTANCE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PHASES.

WHEN we speak of Goethe as having created the literature of Germany, do we mean that he brought it back from wildness to Greek shapeliness and decorum? And in the general movement of European literature does Goethe stand among the correct and cold, and not rather among the audacious and inspiring masters? There is surely much confusion in the ordinary view which is taken of him outside Germany. He is commonly named among the great literary leaders who exploded the classicism of the stage, who wrote the name of Shakespeare on their flag, and conquering under that sign, introduced a richer, bolder, more imaginative style of literature. As a specimen of this new style we point to "Faust." The best proof that Goethe really had this kind of influence is afforded by the career of Scott.

*quote*



Though English writers in general were slow to feel the influence of Goethe, as I have remarked especially in the case of Coleridge, yet there was one exception. Scott, the very incarnation of Romanticism—Scott, of all great modern poets the most completely a stranger to the whole Hellenic world—read and imitated Goethe when as yet no other Englishman did. He translated “Götz v. Berlichingen” in 1799, and the influence of that play is traceable in “Ivanhoe,” as “Mignon” is imitated in “Peveril of the Peak,” and perhaps also the harper of “Wilhelm Meister” in the “Lay of the Last Minstrel.” He spoke of Goethe as his master, and does not this naturally lead us to think of Goethe as a great light of the romantic school? Scott’s biographer thinks that but for “Götz” the idea might never have flashed upon Scott’s mind that his own legendary lore might be worked up into poems and romances. Thereupon he takes occasion to speak of Goethe as if he were undoubtedly a writer of the same order as Scott, and of “Götz” he says that it is “the first-fruits of that passionate admiration for Shakspeare to which all that is excellent in the recent imaginative literature of Germany must be traced.”



*Romantic works  
of Goldsmith*

How are these undoubted facts, that Goethe wrote romantic works which had a powerful influence all over Europe, that he appeared before Germany as an enthusiastic Shakspearian, that a great part of "Wilhelm Meister," not one of his earlier works, is occupied with the praise of Shakspeare, and that "Faust" is Shakspearian, to be reconciled with another set of facts equally undoubted—viz., that Goethe was a decided classicist, who was censured for his coldness, and has to defend himself against the charge that he "refused to leave the ancients behind him," that he writes plays and poems in antique form, ceases to imitate Shakspeare (except in the single case of "Faust"), and that he represents the abandonment of Gothic for Greek models as all-important, as no mere matter of taste, but as a kind of moral conversion or salvation.

*Goldsmith's  
Faust*

This is partly explained by the distinction I have marked between the first and the second Goethe. It was the first Goethe, the contemporary of Goldsmith, who was Scott's master; of the second Goethe Scott knew nothing, nor, apparently, did Scott's biographer. If "Faust" is Shakspearian, this is because the plan of it was conceived by the first Goethe, and because it was finally executed, not by the

*quicker*

second Goethe, but by a third, who was in some degree an echo of the first. If "Wilhelm Meister," a work of the second period, is full of the name of Shakspeare, this is because it was begun in the first period, and has many characteristics of the first period, especially in its earlier parts. But when we have recognized so much, we must still crave to understand more distinctly the nature of the difference between the first and second Goethe. For it is rather shocking to find the young genius who at four-and-twenty warmed German literature into life by the fire of his first writings, and by the same writings later inspired Scott, disowning in a manner those writings, becoming as remarkable for coldness as he had been for warmth, and going over, as it might seem, to the very school over which he had triumphed. It is perplexing as well as shocking; for to say simply that Goethe missed his way, and, having begun well, yielded, as many others have done, to the seductions of a conventional art, is easy, but it is almost equivalent to pronouncing his whole career a failure. This change of opinion is the great occurrence of his life—it is the great subject of his writings. If we treat it

as an unfortunate bewilderment, we reduce Goethe's rank incalculably. He is regarded by his countrymen as one who through a long life struggled victoriously forward to the light; whose clearness and instinct for truth were almost more remarkable than his imagination. It is for this reason that they are never weary of contemplating and studying him. But all his reputation for wisdom is involved with his change of opinion. If that be treated as an aberration, we have before us quite another sort of Goethe. It is the Goethe we meet with in many French and English criticisms—a brilliant poet of the same family as Byron, Moore, and Scott, and having some of the qualities of each of these. It is the author who, in "Götz" and the "Erlkönig," led the way for Scott; in "Faust" gave Byron the model for "Manfred;" while in his "West-östlicher Divan" he ran a race with the poet of "Lalla Rookh." But this Goethe must be conceived as dying young, like Byron, not indeed literally, but in the sense that we must deny him all qualities but those of youth, sensibility, imagination and passion.

Let us look then a little closer at this change

of opinion. The first Goethe, as has been said, is best described as a Shakspearian. Just when Lessing had brought the French plays into discredit, and had called attention to Shakspeare, appeared "Götz v. Berlichingen," and the nation felt that they had in the young Goethe the man who could realize all that Lessing had taught them to desire. For some time Goethe himself took the same view of his vocation. With what enthusiasm at this time he regarded Shakspeare we may read in "Wilhelm Meister." Of all the testimonies to Shakspeare's genius which have been rendered by great judges, this of Goethe's is almost the most emphatic :—

"These precious pieces seem to be the work of some heavenly genius who mixes with mankind to give it in the gentlest manner the knowledge of itself. They are not poems! I seem to stand before the monstrous books of fate thrown wide open, a whirlwind of restless life rushing through them and flapping the leaves now this way, now that. The strength and tenderness, the power and repose, astonish me so, they disturb me with such agitation, that I can only wait longingly for the time when I may find myself in a situation to read further."

It might have been expected that he who felt

thus, and who had already written "Götz," would now proceed to write many other plays in the same taste. He does proceed to write "Egmont," but even in this play the inspiration seems on the ebb, and after this he writes no Shakspearian play until, thirty-five years after "Götz," he launches "Faust" into the world.

We do not find him ceasing to admire Shakspeare, still less beginning to see merit in those French pieces which had reigned on the stage before Shakspeare came into vogue. He does not precisely change any opinion. Still it appears that before what I have called his second appearance, Shakspeare has ceased to have an active influence over him. He has passed under the influence of another set of writers, and these, it so happens, are the classics. From this time he begins to stand before the public in a new character, no longer as the darling and idol of the reading world, but as an unpopular, unappreciated writer, appealing to the Muses in the approved fashion against the unjust judgment of the multitude. His manifesto is the preface to "Hermann und Dorothea," written in elegiacs, where he begins thus: "So it is a sin that I am inspired by Propertius, and that the rogue

*Longe**unpopular*

Martial keeps company with me, that I did not leave the ancients behind me in the school, but took them with me to Latium," etc., etc.

And then he goes on to put his new poem under the protection of two of the great classicists—F. A. Wolf, whose "Prolegomena" were just then occupying the learned world, and Voss, the great authority on German hexameters. It is to be observed that during this second period, as a sort of badge of adhesion to classicism, he adopts classical metres or a highly classical form of blank verse. The epigrams of this period for example are in hexameters and pentameters, whereas in those of a later period, the "Zahme Xenien" for example, dactyls and spondees have vanished, and the rhyme has reappeared. Of this later type is,—

"Noch ist es Tag, da rühre sich der Mann,  
Die Nacht tritt ein, wo Niemand wirken kann."

This change looks superficially like reaction, like a sort of apostasy, but it is in reality something much less and something much more. There is in it, indeed, a certain element of reaction. The disappearance of the French conventional rules had introduced confusion. Both



Goethe, and in the later years of his life Schiller, were impatient of the formlessness which had begun to reign in literature. It was not enough that Germany should throw off the foreign style ; she was now to substitute a style of her own. Having breathed life into the literature of his country twenty years before, Goethe now found himself called upon to give it form. Warmth and sentiment it had in abundance, but it wanted character. Canons were needed, standards had to be set up ; for Goethe perceived with distress how readily the Teutonic genius reconciles itself to a certain vague rich confusion, how lightly it dispenses with outlines, how tolerant and helplessly good-natured is its taste. It is the burden of the correspondence between Goethe and Schiller that the public have no judgment, no character ; and both alike see the only remedy in giving greater regularity, greater firmness of outline to literary work. That they should agree so decidedly on this head is a great proof that they were right in relation to their time and country, however in the abstract we may be surprised to find poets of that order laying so much stress on rule. Both alike, too, agree in going to the antique for models ; it may .



surprise those who regard modern German literature as founded on Shakspeare to observe how seldom in this correspondence Shakspeare, and how continually the antique, is referred to. Moreover, though the charge of coldness, of artificiality, has fallen principally upon Goethe, yet we see that Schiller is quite as much open to it, nay is, in literary criticism, almost more rigorously classicist than Goethe.

So far then Goethe, in his second period, may be called a reactionist, though we can easily imagine that the reaction in which he led the way was wise and necessary. There are times when liberty is the good cause, but there are other times when law, or restriction of liberty, is the thing most urgently needed. In Germany, at that moment, scarcely anything in the art of literary composition was fixed. We find Goethe himself anxiously studying books on prosody in order to find out how to write verses. To him, too, the hexameter, which he now adopts, and which he strangely uses even where, as in "Reineke Fuchs," both the fable and the tone of thought are Teutonic, is no mere exotic which he takes a pedantic pleasure in naturalizing. German literature had no recognized metre for

Have  
paraphrase of  
classicism  
- quote

long narrative poems; but Klopstock's "Messiah" was in hexameters; the conservative course therefore, on the whole, was to write in hexameters, and all that remained for decision was how to write good ones.

But, after all, this formal and technical aspect of Goethe's classicism is only one side of it. The great change of opinion of which he makes so much, the initiation of Wilhelm, the marriage of Faust to Helen of Greece, is not a mere literary change, not a mere recognition of the importance of rules in literature. Goethe professes to have undergone a complete transformation, a sort of regeneration, through his visit to Italy. The sight of Greek sculpture and Italian life under an Italian sky suggests to his mind, not merely certain new rules of composition and versification, but a new conception of life. It transforms in the first instance his opinions about literature, in the next his opinions about art in general, but also his whole manner of regarding human life, and therefore his morality and his religion. A visit to Italy has often produced some such effect upon painters and sculptors, but they have been only half conscious of it, or have but inarticulately

not a  
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and  
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made

striven to communicate it to others. A great event happened, when the southern world of art was reflected for the first time in the mirror of a mind large enough to contain it all, and clear enough to give it back faithfully. A great event, and an event which would have been unique, if Goethe had not had a precursor in Winckelmann.

Goethe becomes a classicist in the sense that he begins to see the world with the eyes of an ancient artist, and therefore begins to have the instincts and to adopt the views of an ancient artist. Classicism in this sense is widely different from the classicism of the French period, against which this same Goethe led the rebellion. It might be an illusion, or illusion might mix with it, or the notion that it was possible or desirable to revive an obsolete view of the world, might be erroneous; in any case, it was wholly different from French classicism. That was a conventional classicism. It rested on a blind reverence for the ancient world as superior to the modern, or, if on reason, on a cold prosaic reason. Against it every warm feeling, every fresh recognition of the truth of Nature, every new movement of the human heart, every stir-

*Trend classicism → conventional cold, prosaic*  
*Goethe's classicism → natural classicism*  
*genuinely on the side*  
*of the ancients*

ring of genius, was always in rebellion. This, on the other hand, was a natural classicism. It was all on the side of genius and Nature ; but it affirmed, at the same time, that genius and Nature were on the side of the ancients. It began, we are to remark, by altering somewhat the terms of the discussion, for instead of merely the drama or merely literature, it spoke of art in general. By this means it brought Greek sculpture, architecture, and painting to the help of Greek poetry. Phidias and Apelles were called in to help Euripides. Then it went on to affirm that art, the name of the comprehensive conception to which so much importance was now for the first time attached, was the result of a peculiar view of the universe and of human life which had prevailed among the ancients, but had been for the most part lost among the moderns. In the modern world, indeed, there had been germs of art, impulses towards it—nay, exceptionally, there had been great and striking artistic creations. But, on the whole, the antique was the school, not only of sculpture, as every one admitted, but of art as such, and therefore of every art, including poetry and literature. Nay, culture itself (*Bildung*, the

*the 'sion  
of the  
day*  
 word which is repeated with such iteration in  
 "Wilhelm Meister"), a conception more com-  
 prehensive still than art, is in the main only a  
 journey southward. It begins in the yearning  
 cry, "Kennst du das Land?" It proceeds by  
 purging the mind of "northern phantoms,"  
 northern bewilderments, and making it clear,  
 cheerful and sunny, as was the mind of an  
 ancient Greek.

*quite  
- natural  
inevitable*  
 This view was not gradually excogitated by  
 Goethe, but came upon him as a revelation  
 while he lived in Italy. Under that sun, in that  
 climate, so it seemed to him, art was natural,  
 inevitable. On the northern side of the Alps it  
 was not so natural, and if it was to thrive there,  
 it must strive as an exotic. Thirty years after  
 his Italian journey, when he had been half  
 disenchanted by a second tour, when he had  
 witnessed the partial failure of his classicizing  
 experiments, and had made large concessions  
 to the opposite school, he still says that he  
 takes courage when he thinks that he too "has  
 lived and loved in the sun-bright land" (Hab'  
 doch auch im sonnenhellen Land gelebt,  
 geliebt).

This theory, it is to be observed, does not

break with Shakspeare ; rather, it classes Shakspeare along with the ancients. For it lays stress upon that one feature in which Shakspeare is so remarkably an ancient—his naturalism, his enjoyment of the world as it is, his freedom from the disease which has been called other-worldliness.

But why, it may be asked, should Goethe look to models at all? Had not he, above all other men, shown that genius can depend on its own inherent powers? He had found a nation of temperament richly imaginative, but perhaps somewhat too passive, slavishly devoted to foreign models. He had broken the yoke, flung aside conventions, and produced in "Götz" an original work, full of warmth, vigour, and genuine German feeling. How disappointing to find this Prometheus, before twenty years have expired, dangling in Roman studios, talking the cant of the dilettante, and vainly endeavouring to force the consonantal syllables of his native German into the frame of the hexameter and the pentameter!

deprecate

"So hab' ich von Herzen  
Rothstrumpf immer gehasst und Violetstrumpf dazu."



If the shade of Virgil read this line, would it treat Goethe as affectionately as it did Dante? Would it not remark that in that last dactyl the second syllable, which should be short, is assuredly long, if ever a syllable was long, by position? Indeed, it does not seem certain that so much trouble bestowed on the naturalization of classical metres was well spent. Heinrich Heine, it has been observed, would never use them, and I find a very recent critic of "Hermann und Dorothea" remarking that the poem is not really so popular in Germany as might be supposed, and that the obstacle to its popularity is its metre, which the multitude do not understand, so that they read the verses as prose. But when we blame Goethe for wandering after foreign models, perhaps we do not rightly understand his position, and perhaps also we err when we suppose that even the greatest poet can dispense with models. At any rate, Goethe's early works cannot be cited in proof of such a view. In several of those early works he had shown himself unable to rise out of the element that surrounded him. "Stella" is as extravagant, "Clavigo" as poor and mean, as other German works of that time.

!!

*important*



"Werther" is a wonderful literary performance ; but it can scarcely be called healthy in tone. Of all those compositions of the first Goethe only "Götz" can be called healthy. Only of "Götz" can we say that, after a century has passed over it, it may still be read with delight. And to what does "Götz" owe this superiority ? To the fact that here Goethe had models, by the contemplation of which he could raise himself above and out of his time. He had the ancient memoir, and for dramatic style and tone he had Shakspeare. So far in fact from leaning only on himself, the peculiar characteristic of the young Goethe is that he lives in the writings of the great primitive poets. Thus his Werther always carries a Homer, and in his last despair reads Ossian. Here, as usual, Goethe's fiction is only fact slightly disguised. The classical models which he followed in his second period were not really more foreign than the Homer, the Ossian, and the Shakspeare who were his models in the first.

It must be confessed that he could not do without models of some kind, but if he looked abroad and not at home for models, this was not from perverseness or pedantry, but simply

*no models for him  
at home*

*Goethe -  
Lectures*

*German models*  
because they were not to be found at home. Germany had indeed the popular song, and no one will deny that Goethe did full justice to this. But what had Germany besides? There was the old puppet-show, and there were the rough-hewn verses of honest Hans Sachs. Goethe does not neglect these. He makes far more out of them than would have been thought possible. He almost revived the fame of Hans Sachs by that most delightful poetical sketch of him. And he wrote in his first period a great quantity of popular doggerel (*Knittelverse*), in which satire, humour and pathos, the grave and the gay, are freely blended together. Such hearty enjoyment had he of the popular element in poetry! In this free-and-easy popular style the First Part of "Faust" itself is for the most part written.

But Germany could furnish no more. It was not from pedantry that Goethe turned his back on the German literature of recent generations. There were no German Miltons and Shakspeares against whose examples it would have been an impiety to rebel. But could he not have gone back to the Minnesänger? He answers us himself: "The Minnesänger lay too far from

us; we should have had to begin by learning their language; and that was not in our way; we wanted to live, not to learn." These, then, were the circumstances which drove Goethe to seek for foreign models. He could not find at home poets who could teach him how to speak in the great style. He was forced to look abroad. Shakspeare attracted him first; there he found, even in the heart of the cold north, the vigour, freshness, freedom, natural passion, and natural grace, of which he was in search. But later he thought he saw that what was to be found in Shakspeare alone among the moderns was to be found everywhere among the ancients, and that the true home of the artist is not where an exceptional genius triumphs over the gloom of Nature, but where Nature itself is sunny and where men have a religion of joy.

It is to be observed that this discovery of Goethe's was not made quite so suddenly, and was not quite such an original discovery, as we might be inclined to suppose. His father had made a tour in Italy, which he regarded as the great event of his life, and which he recorded in Italian, so that the song of Mignon, the vague yearning towards Italy, was a household

*quite*

*Der...  
Shakspeare  
als Noth  
aufgehabt  
sich den  
Klassiker  
nennen*

word to the young Goethe. Thus predisposed, he watched in the most impressible years of his life the career of Winckelmann; he has described it in language which shows how deeply it has interested him. The transformation he himself underwent in Italy was after all, we discover, the same transformation that Winckelmann had undergone in Italy twenty years earlier. Goethe went to Italy prepared to undergo it, and he underwent it accordingly. The feelings he describes were no doubt real, but he would scarcely have experienced them had not Winckelmann experienced and described them a few years before. Out of this transformation there came forth a new Goethe, the author of "Iphigenie," "Tasso," "Hermann und Dorothea," the Roman Elegiacs, and a multitude of less striking compositions, all alike antique in form. Here was a Goethe whom assuredly Scott would never have called his master; indeed it is difficult to imagine Scott reading any of these poems with patience. It was a Goethe whom the German public itself could not at first recognize. They became estranged from their old idol. They said he was altered, that he had become cold, a

sensualist, a heathen. They thought that his court-life must have spoiled him. So, for instance, said Niebuhr. This was a Goethe clad in soft raiment, and living in kings' courts; it was not the Goethe they had gone out into the wilderness to see. He was deeply hurt, and began to fall into despondency; he was in a fair way to abandon poetry; when Schiller came to the rescue. Schiller had succeeded to something of the popularity of the first Goethe; his "Robbers" and "Don Carlos" were now what "Götz" and "Werther" had been twenty years earlier. To him men pointed in triumph, when they spoke of the melancholy decline of Goethe's genius, for in him they found still all the warmth, the glowing sentiments, the enthusiastic eloquence which Goethe had had before he sank into sensualism. It was therefore an extraordinary surprise, and almost the beginning of a new life for Goethe, when this Schiller, whom he had for some time avoided as a rival, showed himself a devoted disciple. In his letters to Goethe, especially those in which he reviews "Wilhelm Meister," he uses such language of admiration as perhaps no man of equal mark ever used to a contemporary; and

Schiller  
came to  
the rescue

what was more surprising, he did not, even by the faintest hint, allege any of the objections that were fashionable against Goethe's new style. His admiration is unqualified and unbounded. Thus encouraged, Goethe remained a poet, and fought the battle of classicism manfully as long as Schiller lived. By Schiller's help, by the help of the rising Schlegels, and by the support of Rahel's *salon*, Goethe retains in this second period, in spite of all opposition, his pre-eminent place, which is further assured to him by the concessions he makes and the new successes he wins in the third period.

Thus, there are two Goethes, one of world-wide popularity, the great sentimentalist and romancer, the poet of Gretchen, Clärchen, Mignon, and Zuleikha; the other, little known to the multitude either in Germany or abroad, but the master of a school, the great practical philosopher of culture and the artistic life. In the first character Goethe stands by the side of Byron and Scott, or at some point between them and Shakspeare. In particular, his songs are unrivalled, and no one has surpassed him in the delineation of female character.

But he is also, above and beyond Scott and



Byron, a great mover of modern thought, one of the principal makers of modern opinion. That Hellenic view of life, which passed from Winckelmann to him, does not now appear, when the centenary of his Italian tour is behind us, to have been a mere illusion, a mere passing crotchet. Goethe's adhesion to classicism appears now as a leading event in the later stages of the Renaissance. In the main the nineteenth century has been moved by impulses in which he had little share. He is in the main a man of the old *régime*, with little sympathy either for popular or for national movements. Occasionally we are startled at the obsolescence of the opinions he expresses, as when he told a young admirer of Dante at Rome that "he had never been able to conceive how a man could choose to busy himself with such poems." That certainly is the true voice of the eighteenth century! And, in like manner, a recent worshipper of Goethe (Friedrich Vischer) detects the old *régime* in the moral laxity of "Wilhelm Meister," and declares that on this account the German nation has never cared for or understood "Wilhelm Meister." Nevertheless the Renaissance of the nineteenth century



which is not less victorious than that of the fifteenth and sixteenth, has taken, on the whole, the form which it assumed in Goethe's mind. We do not regard the ancients now with any superstitious veneration; we do not dream of contrasting them either favourably or unfavourably with Shakspeare; but we do homage to the Hellenic genius, because we find in it the same clearness and health, the same cheerful enjoyment and bold grasp of Nature, that we find in Shakspeare. This latest Renaissance is a doctrine that has a deep and wide application, and Goethe is the great teacher of it.

It is worth while to notice, in concluding this chapter, another misconception which may be made by those who try to fix Goethe's place, and to estimate his work, in European literature. He has evidently his share in a movement of reform in poetry which went on in many countries at once. It is easy therefore to imagine that movement to have had more unity in the different countries than it actually had. In this way we may come to attribute to Goethe a sovereign leadership in the European literary transition, and to say that he did for Germany, though with wider intelligence, substantially the

same service that Wordsworth, Coleridge and others did for England. It is indeed striking to see that in both countries alike the idea prevailed of renewing poetry, and of bringing to an end the poetic tradition of the eighteenth century. In England that tradition was almost abandoned to Rogers and Campbell ; the more powerful poets, however they might differ among themselves, agreed for the most part, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Scott, Byron, Shelley, Keats, in being reformers or transformers of poetry. In like manner we have seen Goethe about the same time not so much transforming as actually creating the poetry of Germany.

*G. creates  
quite a new  
poetic world*

But if so far there is resemblance let us now remark that there is nothing parallel in England to the classicism of Goethe. Not one of those daring English reformers, if we put aside the attempt of Keats to revive Greek mythology by the aid of Lempriere, had a thought of seeking models in antiquity. Much less did any one of them dream of absolutely identifying the spirit of poetry with the spirit of antiquity, or lay it down with Schiller that he who would be a poet must be born again under a distant Grecian sky.

So wide was the difference behind the resemblance between the movement in the two countries. And the peculiar form of Renaissance which was wanting in England sprang up in Germany in many forms at once. As we have seen, Winckelmann prepared the way for Goethe. Somewhat later appeared F. A. Wolf, who not only founded the great German school of philology, but also propped up classical education by expanding it into a comprehensive *Alterthumswissenschaft*, or Life in Antiquity, and thus, as it were, laid it down that not merely the poet but every school-boy must be born again under the Grecian sky.

But perhaps as much has been said as suits the size of this volume to show how important both for estimating Goethe's works, and for establishing his place in literature, is the discrimination of the periods through which his genius passed.

## CHAPTER VII.

### SELF-CULTURE.

THERE is a kind of first or supreme class in literature which consists of those who combine the properly poetical with philosophical qualities, and crown both with a certain robust sincerity and common sense. The sovereign poet must be not merely a singer, but also a sage; to passion and music he must add large ideas and abundant knowledge; he must extend in width as well as in height; but, besides this, he must be no dreamer or fanatic, he must be rooted as firmly in the hard earth as he spreads widely and mounts freely towards the sky. Goethe, as we have described him, satisfies these conditions, and, perhaps, as much can be said of no other men of the modern world but Dante and Shakspeare.

Of this trio each is complete in all the three dimensions. Each feels deeply, each knows and sees clearly, and each has a stout grasp of reality. This completeness is what gives them their uni-

Singer  
and  
Sage

quote

trio

*Dante  
Shakespeare  
Goethe*

versal fame, and makes them interesting in all times and places. Each, however, is less complete in some directions than in others. Dante, though no fanatic, yet is less rational than so great a man should have been. Shakspeare has one deficiency, he wants academic knowledge. Goethe, too, has his defects, but this is rather the place for dwelling on his peculiar merits. In respect of influence upon the world, he has for the present the advantage of being the latest, and therefore the least obsolete and exhausted, of the three. But he is also essentially much more of a teacher than his two predecessors. Alone among them he combines with a sovereign imagination a great range of knowledge and a capacity and habit of taking practical views.

*He  
reads*

From Shakspeare, no doubt, the world may learn, and has learnt, much, yet he professed so little to be a teacher, that he has often been represented as almost without personal opinions, as a mere undisturbed mirror, in which all Nature reflects itself. Something like a century passed before it was perceived that his works deserved to be in a serious sense studied. Dante was to his countrymen a great example and source of inspiration, but hardly, perhaps, a

great teacher. On the other hand, Goethe was first to his own nation, and has since been to the whole world, what he describes his own Chiron, "the noble pedagogue,"<sup>1</sup> a teacher and wise counsellor on all the most important subjects. To students in almost every department of literature and art, to unsettled spirits needing advice for the conduct of life, to the age itself in a great transition, he offers his word of weighty counsel, and is probably the wisest of all the men whom we denominate poets. It is the great point of distinction between him and Shakspeare, that he is so seriously didactic. Like Shakspeare myriad-minded, he has nothing of that ironic indifference, that irresponsibility, which has been often attributed to Shakspeare. He is, indeed, strangely indifferent on many points, which other teachers count important; but the lessons which he himself considers important, he teaches over and over again with all the seriousness of one who is a teacher by vocation. And, as I have said, when we look at his teaching as a whole, we find that it has unity, that, taken together, it makes a system,

*quote  
didactic*

<sup>1</sup> "Der grosse Mann, der edle Pedagog,  
Der, sich zum Ruhm, ein Heldenvolk erzogen."



not indeed in the academic sense, but in the sense that one or two great and far-reaching ideas pervade it. There may be some difficulty in distinguishing which these ideas are. The variety of his subjects and styles is so great, and he abandons himself to each in turn so completely, that in his works, as in Nature itself, the unity is much less obvious than the multiplicity. Now that we have formed some estimate of the magnitude of his influence, and have also distinguished the stages by which his genius was developed, and his influence in Germany and the world diffused, it remains to examine his genius itself, the peculiar way of thinking, and the fundamental ideas through which he influenced the world.

Never, perhaps, was a more unfortunate formula invented than when, at a moment of reaction against his ascendancy, it occurred to some one to assert that Goethe had talent but not genius. No doubt the talent is there; perhaps no work in literature exhibits a mastery of so many literary styles as "Faust." From the sublime lyric of the prologue, which astonished Shelley, it leads us through scenes in which the problems of human character are

must  
not be  
piece



dealt with, scenes in which the supernatural is brought surprisingly near to real life, scenes of humble life startlingly vivid, grotesque scenes of devilry, scenes of overwhelming pathos ; then, in the Second Part, we find an incomparable revival of the Greek drama, and at the close, a Dantesque vision of the Christian heaven. Such versatility in a single work is unrivalled ; and the versatility of which Goethe's writings, as a whole, gives evidence is much greater still. But to represent him, on this account, as a sort of mocking-bird, or ready imitator, is not merely unjust. Even if we give this representation a flattering turn, and describe him as a being almost superior to humanity, capable of entering fully into all that men think and feel, but holding himself independent of it all, such a being as is described (where, I suppose, Goethe is pointed at) in the Palace of Art, again, I say, it is not merely unjust. Not merely Goethe was not such a being, but we may express it more strongly and say : such a being is precisely what Goethe was not. He had, no doubt, a great power of entering into foreign literatures ; he was, no doubt, indifferent to many controversies which in England, when

quok

we began to read him, still raged hotly. But these were characteristic qualities, not of Goethe personally, but of Germany in the age of Goethe. A sort of cosmopolitan characterlessness marked the nation, so that Lessing could say in Goethe's youth that the character of the Germans was to have no character. Goethe could not but share in the infirmity, but his peculiarity was that from the beginning he felt it as an infirmity, and struggled to overcome it. That unbounded tolerance, that readiness to allow everything and appreciate every one, which was so marked in the Germans of that time that it is clearly perceptible in their political history, and contributed to their humiliation by Napoleon, is just what is satirized in the delineation of Wilhelm Meister. Jarno says to Wilhelm, "I am glad to see you out of temper; it would be better still if you could be for once thoroughly angry." This sentiment was often in Goethe's mouth; so far was he from priding himself upon serene universal impartiality. Crabbe Robinson heard him say what an annoyance he felt it to appreciate everything equally and to be able to hate nothing. He flattered himself at that time that he had a real aversion. "I

hate," he said, "everything Oriental" ("Eigentlich hasse ich alles Orientalische"). He goes further in the "West-östlicher Divan," where, in enumerating the qualities a poet ought to have, he lays it down as indispensable that he should hate many things ("Dann zuletzt ist unerlässlich dass der Dichter *manches hasse*"). True, no doubt, that he found it difficult to hate. An infinite good nature was born in him, and, besides this, he grew up in a society in which all established opinions had been shaken, so that for a rational man it was really difficult to determine what deserved hatred or love. What is wholly untrue in that description of him which was so fashionable forty years ago—"I sit apart holding no form of creed, but contemplating all"—is that this tolerance was the intentional result of cold pride or self-sufficiency. He does not seem to me to have been either proud or unsympathetic, and among the many things of which he might boast, certainly he would not have included a want of definite opinions—he, who was never tired of rebuking the Germans for their vagueness, and who admired young Englishmen expressly because they seemed to know their own minds, even

quote

*the Germans  
good natured  
well read*

when they had little mind to know. Distinctness, character, is what he admires, what through life he struggles for, what he and Schiller alike chide the Germans for wanting. But he cannot attain it by a short cut. Narrowness is impossible to him, not only because his mind is large, but because the German public in their good-natured tolerance have made themselves familiar with such a vast variety of ideas. He cannot be a John Bull, however much he may admire John Bull, because he does not live in an island. To have distinct views he must make a resolute act of choice, since all ideas have been laid before him, all are familiar to the society in which he lives. This perplexity, this difficulty of choosing what was good out of such a heap of opinions, he often expresses: "The people to be sure are not accustomed to what is best, but then they are so terribly wellread!"<sup>1</sup> But it is just the struggle he makes for distinctness that is admirable in him. The breadth, the tolerance, he has in common with his German contemporaries; what he has to himself is the resolute determination to arrive at clearness.

<sup>1</sup> "Zwar sind sie an das Beste nicht gewöhnt,  
Allein sie haben schrecklich viel gelesen."

Nevertheless, he may seem indifferent even to those whose minds are less contracted than was the English mind half a century ago, for this reason, that his aim, though not less serious than that of others, is not quite the same. He seldom takes a side in the controversies of the time. You do not find him weighing the claims of Protestantism and Catholicism, nor following with eager interest the dispute between orthodoxy and rationalism. Again, when all intellectual Germany is divided between the new philosophy of Kant and the old system, and later, when varieties show themselves in the new philosophy, when Fichte and Schelling succeed to the vogue of Kant, Goethe remains little disturbed by all these changes of opinion. He is almost as little affected by political controversy. The French Revolution irritates him, but not so much because it is opposed to his convictions as because it creates disturbance. Like Lutheranism in past times, as he says, it is unfavourable to quiet culture. Even the War of Liberation cannot rouse him. Was he not then a quietist? Did he not hold himself aloof, whether in a proud feeling of superiority or in mere Epicurean indifference, from all the interests and passions of humanity?

Goethe  
does  
not  
take  
sides

quiet

If this were the case, or nearly the case, Goethe would have no claim to rank in the first class of literature. He might pass for a prodigy of literary expertness and versatility, but he would attract no lasting interest. Such quietism in a man upon whom the eyes of a whole nation were bent, could never be compared to the quietism of Shakspeare, who belonged to the uninfluential classes, and to whom no one looked for guidance.

*quote  
iebsen =  
preoccupation  
by Goethe*

But in truth the quietism of Goethe was the effect not of indifference or of selfishness, but of preoccupation. He had prescribed to himself in early life a task, and he declined to be drawn aside from it by the controversies of the time. It was a task worthy of the powers of the greatest man; it appeared to him, when he devoted himself to it, more useful and necessary than the special undertakings of theologian or philosopher. At the outset he might fairly claim to be the only earnest man in Germany, and might regard the partisans alike in Church and University as triflers in comparison with himself. The French Revolution changed the appearance of things. He could not deny that the political questions opened by that convul-



sion were of the greatest importance. But he was now forty years old, and the work of his life had begun so early, had been planned with so much care and prosecuted with so much method, that he was less able than many men might have been to make a new beginning at forty. Hence he was merely disturbed by the change which inspired so many others, and to the end of his life continued to look back upon the twenty odd years between the Seven Years' War and the Revolution as a golden time, as in a peculiar sense his own time.<sup>1</sup>

*reason*

The new events disturbed him in his habits without actually forcing him to form new habits; he found himself able, though with less comfort, to lead the same sort of life as before; and so he passed into the Napoleonic period, and arrived in time at the year of liberation, 1813. Then, indeed, his quietism became shocking, and perhaps at times he felt it so himself; but it was

<sup>1</sup> "Zwanzig Jahre liess ich gehn  
Und genoss was mir beschieden;  
Eine Reihe völlig schön  
Wie die Zeit der Barmeciden."—*West. Div.*

Düntzer comments thus on this passage:—"E bezieht sich auf die Zeit vom siebenjährigen Kriege bis zur französischen Umwälzung."



now really too late to abandon a road on which he had travelled so long, and which he had honestly selected as the best.

What, then, was this task to which Goethe had so early devoted himself, and which seemed to him too important to be postponed even to the exigencies of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic periods? It was that task about which, since Goethe's time, so much has been said—self-culture. "From my boyhood," says Wilhelm, speaking evidently for Goethe himself, "it has been my wish and purpose to develop completely all that is in me." Elsewhere he says, "to make my own existence harmonious." Here is the refined form of selfishness of which Goethe has been so often accused. And undoubtedly the phrase is one which will bear a selfish interpretation, just as a Christian may be selfish when he devotes himself to the salvation of his soul. But in the one case, as in the other, it is before all things evident that the task undertaken is very serious, and that the man who undertakes it must be of a very serious disposition. When, as in Goethe's case, it is self-planned and self-imposed, such an undertaking is comparable to those great practical experiments in the conduct of life which

58. Goethe  
and devoted  
himself to

Self-culture

quote  
harmonious  
existence

were made by the early Greek philosophers. Right or wrong, such an experiment can only be imagined by an original man, and can only be carried into effect by a man of very steadfast will. But we may add that it is no more necessary to give a selfish interpretation to this formula than to the other formulæ by which philosophers have tried to describe the object of a moral life. A harmonious existence does not necessarily mean an existence passed in selfish enjoyment. Nor is the pursuit of it necessarily selfish, since the best way to procure a harmonious existence for others is to find out by an experiment practised on oneself in what a harmonious existence consists, and by what methods it may be attained. For the present, at least, let us content ourselves with remarking that Goethe, who knew his own mind as well as most people, considered himself to carry disinterestedness almost to an extreme. What especially struck him in Spinoza, he says,<sup>1</sup> was the boundless unselfishness that shone out of such sentences as this, "He who loves God must not require that God should love him again." "For," he continues, "to be unselfish in everything, especially in love and friendship,

<sup>1</sup> Aus meinem Leben, Book xiv.

Goethe's egoism

quote

was my highest pleasure, my maxim, my discipline, so that that petulant sentence written later, 'If I love you, what does that matter to you?' came from my very heart."

*quote*  
However this may be, when a man, so richly gifted otherwise, displays the rarest of all manly qualities—viz., the power and persistent will to make his life systematic, and place all his action under the control of a principle freely and freshly conceived, he rises at once into the highest class of men. It is the strenuous energy with which Goethe enters into the battle of life, and fights there for a victory into which others may enter, that makes him great, that makes him the teacher of these later ages, this, and not some foppish pretension of being above it all, of seeing through it and despising it. But just because he conceived the problem in his own manner, and not precisely as it is conceived by the recognized authorities on the conduct of life, he could take little interest in the controversies which those authorities held among themselves, and therefore passed for indifferent to the problem itself. He did not admit that the question was to form an opinion as to the conditions of the life after death,

though he himself hoped for such a future life, for he wanted rather rightly to understand and to deal with the present life ; nor did he want what is called in the schools a philosophy, remarking probably that the most approved professors of philosophy lived after all much in the same way as other people. It seemed to him that he was more earnest than either the theologians or the philosophers, just because he disregarded their disputes and grappled directly with the question which they under various pretexts evaded—how to make existence satisfactory. //

He grasps it in the rough unceremonious manner of one who means business, and also in the manner which Rousseau had made fashionable. We have desires given us by God or Nature, convertible terms to him ; these desires are meant to receive satisfaction, for the world is not a stupid place, and the Maker of the world is not stupid. This notion that human life is not a stupid affair, and that the fault must be ours if it seems so, that for everything wrong there must be a remedy,<sup>1</sup> is a sort of fundamental axiom with him, as it is with most moral

<sup>1</sup> " Sicherlich es muss das Beste  
Irgendwo zu finden sein."

*moral  
reformers*

reformers. Even when he has death before his mind, he still protests. "‘He is no more!’ Ridiculous! Why ‘no more’? ‘It is all over.’ What can be the meaning of that? Then it might as well never have existed. Give me rather an eternal void." "Faust," Part ii. Act 5. And this way of thinking brings him at once, or so he thinks, into direct conflict with the reigning system of morality, which is founded not on the satisfaction, but on the mortification of desire. He declares war against the doctrine of self-denial or abstinence. "Abstain, abstain!—that is the eternal song that rings in every ear. In the morning I awake in horror, and am tempted to shed bitter tears at the sight of the day, which in its course will not gratify one wish, not one single wish." So speaks Faust, and Goethe ratifies it in his own person, when he complains that "we are not allowed to develop what we have in us, and are denied what is necessary to supply our deficiencies; robbed of what we have won by labour or has been allowed us by kindness, and find ourselves compelled, before we can form a clear opinion about it, to give up our personality, at first in instalments, but at last completely; also

*self-denial  
abstinence  
geizige  
Doktrin*

that we are expected to make a more delighted face over the cup the more bitter it tastes, lest the unconcerned spectator should be affronted by anything like a grimace." He adds that this system is grounded on the maxim that "All is vanity," a maxim which characteristically he pronounces false and blasphemous. That "all is *not* vanity," is indeed almost the substance of Goethe's philosophy. Pessimism was perhaps hardly invented in his time; at any rate his doctrine is that human life is precious, and that we can never value highly enough every passing hour of it.

*Goethe's  
doctrine*

"Jenes süsse Gedränge der leichtesten irdischen Tage  
Ach! wer schätzt ihn genug, diesen vereilenden  
Werth?"—EUPHROSYNE.

Which seems to be echoed by our own Tennyson, when in *Will Waterproof*, addressing his pleasant hour, he writes:—

"So mix for ever with the past,  
Like all good things on earth,  
For should I prize thee, could'st thou last  
At half thy real worth?"

This doctrine, again, is not in itself or necessarily a doctrine of selfishness, though it may easily be represented so. It may be true that

*selfishness*



all virtue requires self-denial ; but for that very reason we may easily conceive a system of senseless and aimless self-denial setting itself up in the place of virtue. It is not every kind of self-denial that Goethe has in view, but the particular kind by which he has found himself hampered. His indignation is not moved when he sees abstinence practised in order to attain some great end ; it is the abstinence which leads to nothing and aims at nothing that provokes him. He has given two striking dramatic pictures of it. There is Faust, who cannot tolerate the emptiness of his secluded life ; but does it appear that he rebels against it simply because it brings no pleasure to himself, even though it confers benefit upon others and upon the world ? The burden of his complaint is that his abstinence does no good to anybody, that the studies for which he foregoes pleasure lead to no real knowledge ; and expressly to make this clear, Goethe introduces the story of the plague, which Faust and his father had tried to cure by a drug which did infinitely more harm than the plague itself. The other picture is that of Brother Martin in "Götz," the young monk who envies Götz his life so full of move-

Faust

Textausgabe



ment and emotion, while he is himself miserable under the restraint of his vows. Here, again, the complaint is that no good comes of such abstinence. The life of self-denial is conceived as an utter stagnation, unhealthy even from a moral point of view. It is contrasted with a life not of luxury, but of strenuous energy, at once wholesome and useful to the world.

So far, then, Goethe's position is identical with that which Protestants take up against monasticism, when they maintain that powers were given to be used, desires implanted in order that they might be satisfied. He does not, any more than they, assert that when some great end is in view it may not be nobler to mortify the desire than to indulge it. But he applies the principle more consistently, and to a greater number of cases than they had applied it. Not against celibacy or useless self-torture only, but against all omission to satisfy desire, against all sluggishness or apathy in enjoyment—understood always that no special end is to be gained by the self-denial—he protests. In his poem, called the "General Confession" ("Generalbeichte") he calls his followers to repent of the sin of having often let slip an

selfishness  
 only preached  
 most elevated  
 balance  
 in  
 philosophy  
 elevated  
 morality  
 not an idea  
 pleasure  
 itself

opportunity of enjoyment, and makes them solemnly resolve not to be guilty of such sins in future. Here, at least, the reader may say, selfishness is openly preached; and perhaps this is the interpretation most commonly put upon the poem. Yet it is certainly unjust to pervert in this way an intentional paradox, and, in fact, in that very poem Goethe introduces the most elevated utterance of his philosophy; for the vow which the penitents are required to take is that they will "wean themselves from half-measures and live resolutely in the Whole, in the Good, and in the Beautiful!" Goethe, in short, holds, as many other philosophers have done, that an elevated morality may be based on the idea of pleasure not less than on the idea of duty.

This principle, not new in itself, led to very new and important results when it was taken up not by a mere reasoner, but by a man of the most various gifts and of the greatest energy. By "pleasure" or "satisfaction of desire" is usually meant something obvious, something passive, merely a supply of agreeable sensations to each of the five senses. In Goethe's mouth the word takes quite a different meaning.

He cannot conceive pleasure without energetic action, and the most necessary of all pleasures to him is that of imaginative creation. The desires, again, for which he claims satisfaction—what are they? Chief among them is the desire to enter into the secret of the universe, to recognize "what it is which holds the world together within." Such desires as these might be satisfied, such pleasures enjoyed, without any very culpable self-indulgence. And existence would be satisfactory, or, as he calls it, harmonious, if it offered continually and habitually food for desire so understood, which is almost the same thing as capacity. But there are hindrances. The chief of these is the superstition of self-denial. Of course every practical man knows that self-denial of a certain kind must be constantly practised in life. The small object must be foregone for the sake of the greater, the immediate pleasure for the sake of the remote, nay, the personal pleasure for the sake of the pleasure which is generous and sympathetic. But the timid superstition which sets up self-denial, divorced from all rational ends, as a thing good and right in itself, which makes us afraid of enjoyment as such, this is the

gentler  
interpretation  
of pleasure

desire

quote

chief hindrance, and against this Goethe launches his chief work, "Faust." There is another hindrance, less obvious, and needing to be dealt with in another way, which Goethe therefore attacks usually in prose rather than in poetry.

Meanwhile the world became gradually aware that one of the most splendidly gifted of men was engaged with indefatigable industry in "developing all that was in him." The remarkable spectacle gradually attracted the attention of all Europe. What was to be thought of it was a question on which opinions differed. Few thought with Goethe himself that such a plan of life was consistent with boundless unselfishness. The opinion rather prevailed that he had invented a new form of selfishness, had brought into the world a new moral monster. And so Tennyson depicted "a glorious devil, large in heart and brain, That did love beauty only, or if good, good only for its beauty." And John Sterling scandalized his friend Carlyle by describing Goethe in a similar way in the Onyx Ring. But Goethe never, I think, either abandoned his plan of life or ceased to believe himself unselfish. What he said in the early

years of his life at Weimar remained true to the end. "The desire to rear as high as possible in the air the pyramid of my existence, of which the base is given and placed for me, predominates over every other, and scarcely allows itself for a moment to be forgotten. I must not neglect myself; I am already pretty well advanced in years, and my destiny may break in the middle and leave the Tower of Babel unfinished. At least men shall say, It was boldly planned."

## CHAPTER VIII.

### WILHELM MEISTER.

*activity  
occupation  
he up to  
inborn capacities*

MAN, as Goethe conceives him, is essentially active. The happiness he seeks is not passive enjoyment, but an occupation, a pursuit adapted to his inborn capacities. It follows that a principal condition of happiness is a just self-knowledge. He will be happy, who knows what he wants and what he can do. Here, again, Goethe gives importance to a doctrine which in itself is obvious enough by the persistent energy with which he applies it. He had been himself bewildered by the multiplicity of his own tastes and aptitudes. He had wanted to do everything in turn, and he has found himself capable to a certain extent of doing everything. Hence the question—What is my true vocation? has been to him exceptionally difficult. In studying it he has become aware of the numberless illusions and misconceptions which hide from most men the true nature of their

own aptitudes, and, therefore, the path of their happiness. He finds that the circumstances of childhood, and especially our system of education, which "excites wishes, instead of awakening tastes," have the effect of creating a multitude of unreal ambitions, deceptive impulses, and semblances of aptitudes. He finds that most men have been more or less misled by these illusions, have more or less mistaken their true vocation, and therefore missed their true happiness. On this subject he has collected a vast mass of observations, and, in fact, added a new chapter to practical morality. This is the subject of "Wilhelm Meister," not the most attractive nor the most perfect, but perhaps the most characteristic, of Goethe's works, and, as it were, the text-book of the Goethian philosophy. It is said not to be widely popular in Germany. Most English readers lay it down bewildered, wondering what Goethe's admirers can see in it so extraordinary, and astonished at the indifference to what we have agreed to call morality—that is, the part of morality that concerns the relations of the sexes—which reigns throughout it. Nevertheless few books have had a deeper influence upon modern literature than this famous novel. It is

Subject  
of

Li. Del.  
Master

Ex-lunch  
do  
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Philos  
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influence



the first important instance of a novel which deals principally, and on a large scale, with opinions or views of life. How Wilhelm mistook his vocation, and how this mistake led to many others; how a secret society, the Society of the Tower, taught a doctrine on the subject of vocations, and of the method by which men are to be assisted in discovering their true vocations; how Wilhelm is assisted, and by what stages he arrives at clearness—this is the subject of a long and elaborate narrative. It is throughout most seriously instructive; it is seldom very amusing; and we may add that the moral of the story is not brought out with very convincing distinctness. But it has been the model upon which the novel of the present day is formed. Written twenty years before the Waverley Novels, which are in the opposite extreme, since they make no serious attempt to teach anything, and dwell upon everything which Goethe disregards—adventure, surprise, costume—it began to produce its effect among us when the influence of the Waverley Novel was exhausted. The idea now prevalent, which gives to the novel a practical as well as an artistic side, the idea which prompts us, when we wish to preach any kind of social

seriously  
instructive

model  
of modern  
novel

or moral reform, to write a novel about it, seems to have made way chiefly through Goethe's authority.

But the substance of "Wilhelm Meister" is even more important than the form. It is a novel with a purpose, for the different characters which it introduces to us are evidently introduced in order that we may understand Goethe's practical philosophy, how he regards human life and human duties. At the same time he does not state with much distinctness what doctrines he wishes to preach. He passes in a bewildering manner from pictures of theatrical life and discussions of the genius of Shakespeare, to delineations of the Christian religious life, upon which evidently no pains have been spared, though the reader is left quite uncertain how much religious belief the author himself may have. There is something alarming about attempts to treat morality in a manner at once so original and so irresponsible. We need not therefore be surprised to learn that Goethe laid himself open to the charge of immorality, and that "Wilhelm Meister" was received with horror by the religious world; it was, if I remember right, publicly burnt by Count Stolberg.

novel  
with a  
purpose  
Goethe's  
practical  
philosophy

*subject of vocation  
→ valuable*

We may distinguish between the positive and the negative part of this moral scheme. All that "Wilhelm Meister" contains on the subject of vocations seems valuable, and the prominence which he gives to the subject is immensely important. In considering how human life should be ordered, Goethe begins with the fact that each man has an occupation, which fills most of his time. It seems to him, therefore, the principal problem to secure that this occupation should be not only worthy, but suited to the capacity of the individual and pursued in a serious spirit. What can be more simple and obvious? And yet, if we reflect, we shall see that moralists have not usually taken this simple view, and that in the accepted morality this whole class of questions is little considered. Duties to this person and to that, to men, to women, to dependents, to the poor, to the State—these are considered; but the greatest of all duties, that of choosing one's occupation rightly, is overlooked. And yet it is the greatest of duties, because on it depend the usefulness and effectiveness of the man's life considered as a whole, and, at the same time

his own peace of mind, or, as Goethe calls it, his inward harmony. Nevertheless, it is so much overlooked that in ordinary views of life all moral interest is, as it were, concentrated upon the hours of leisure. The occupation is treated as a matter of course, a necessary routine about which little can be said. True life is regarded as beginning when work is over. In work men may no doubt be honest or dishonest, energetic or slothful, persevering or desultory, successful or unsuccessful, but that is all; it is only in leisure that they can be interesting, highly moral, amiable, poetical. Such a view of life is, to say the least, unfortunate. It surrenders to deadness and dulness more than half of our existence.

It is thus the distinction of "Wilhelm Meister" that it is actually a novel about business, not merely a realistic novel venturing to approach the edge of that slough of dulness which is supposed to be at the centre of all our lives, but actually a novel about business as such, an attempt to show that the occupation to which a man gives his life is a matter not only for serious thought, but that it is a matter also

*Roman  
in  
Business*

for philosophy and poetry. That such a novel must at first sight appear tame and dull is obvious; it undertakes to create the taste by which it can be enjoyed, and will be condemned at once by all who are not disposed to give it a serious trial.

It is commonly said that "Wilhelm Meister" seems to make Art the one object of life; but this is not Goethe's intention. He was himself an artist, and, as the work is in a great degree autobiographical, art naturally comes into the foreground, and the book becomes especially interesting to artists, but the real subject of it, as I hold, is vocations in general. In the later books, indeed, art drops into the background, and we have a view of feminine vocations. The "Beautiful Soul" represents the pietistic view of life; then Therese appears in contrast, representing the economic or utilitarian view; finally, Natalie hits the golden mean, being practical like Therese, but less utilitarian, and ideal like her aunt, the pietist, but less introspective. On the whole, then, the lesson of the book is that we should give unity to our lives by devoting them

*Lesson  
of the  
novel*

with hearty enthusiasm to some pursuit, and that the pursuit is assigned to us by Nature through the capacities she has given us. It is thus that Goethe substitutes for the idea of pleasure that of the satisfaction of special inborn aptitudes different in each individual. His system treats every man as a genius, for it regards every man as having his own unique individuality, for which it claims the same sort of tender consideration that is conceded to genius. But in laying down such rules Goethe thinks first of himself. He has spent long years in trying to make out his own vocation. He has had an opportunity of living almost every kind of life in turn. It was not till he returned from Italy that he felt himself to have arrived at clearness. What was Goethe's vocation? Or, since happiness consists in faithful obedience to a natural vocation, what was Goethe's happiness? His happiness is a kind of religion, a perpetual rapt contemplation, a beatific vision. The object of this contemplation is Nature, the laws or order of the Universe to which we belong. Of such contemplation he recognizes two kinds, one of which he calls Art and the other

Goethe's  
Glorie  
Kunst  
und  
Wissenschaft  
Gedanken  
über  
Natur



quote

calisthische  
auffassungs-  
voll kommt

consistent  
principle  
of his  
life

Wissenschaft

Science. He was in the habit of thinking that in Art and Science taken together he possessed an equivalent for what other men call their religion. Thus, in 1817, on the occasion of the tercentenary of the Reformation, he writes a poem in which he expresses his devout resolution of showing his Protestantism, as ever, by Art and Science.<sup>1</sup> It was because his view of Art was so realistic, that he was able thus to regard Art as a sort of twin-sister of Science. But the principle involved in this twofold contemplation of Nature is the very principle of religion itself, and in one sense it is true that no man was ever more deliberately and consciously religious than Goethe. No man asserted more emphatically that the energy of action ought to be accompanied by the energy of feeling. It is the consistent principle of his life that the whole man ought to act together, and he pushes it so far that he seems to forbid all division of labour in science. This is the position taken up in "Faust," which perhaps is seldom rightly understood. Science, according to "Faust," must not be dry analysis pursued at a desk in a close

<sup>1</sup> "Will ich in Kunst und Wissenschaft,  
Wie immer, protestiren."



room ; it must be direct wondering contemplation of Nature. The secrets of the world must disclose themselves to a loving gaze, not to dry thinking (*trocknes Sinn*en), man must converse with Nature "as one spirit with another," "look into her breast as into the bosom of a friend." How we should *not* study is conveyed to us first in Faust's long despairing soliloquy and then by the picture of the Famulus Wagner, who is treated with so much contempt. He is simply the ordinary man of science, perhaps we may think the modest practical investigator, of the class to which the advance of science is mainly due. But Goethe has no mercy on him—why? Because his nature is divided, because his feelings do not keep pace with his thoughts, because his attention is concentrated upon single points. Such a man is to Goethe "the dry creeper," "the most pitiable of all the sons of earth."

In this singular doctrine of an immediate, living, worshipping contemplation of Nature as the only method by which true knowledge can be attained, a doctrine by the way upon which the whole plot of Faust is based, we seem to trace the influence of Hamann, an eccentric writer of the time of Goethe's

*Doctum  
Anschauung  
des Natur  
Plot von  
Faust d  
aufgeba*

youth, who was known as the Magus of the North. He had a great influence upon Herder, but also upon Goethe, who for a long time entertained the design of superintending an edition of his works, and who, in the 12th Book of *Dichtung und Wahrheit*, has dwelt upon him in a manner which shows how deeply he felt himself indebted to him. Hamann's style was so enigmatic that many of his readers might have been at a loss to say what precisely he meant to teach. Goethe, however, knew well what he at least had learned from Hamann. He says, The principle to which all his utterances may be referred is this: whatever the human being undertakes to do, whether by way of deed or word or otherwise, must be done with all his powers acting in combination; whatever is isolated is objectionable. On this Goethe remarks, "A glorious maxim, but difficult to carry into effect." Upon this principle he bases his reverence for the antique world, for he writes (Winckelmann, p. 10), "We can do much by a judicious use of single powers, and extraordinary things by the combination of several powers, but supreme, utterly unexpected things only by a harmonious union of all our

*Winckelmann Aufsatz*

*Maxime  
des  
pouvoirs*

*indépendance  
des  
pouvoirs*

powers. The last was the happy lot of the ancients, especially the Greeks in their best time ; we moderns are reduced by our fate to the two former."

But so long as we discuss Goethe's practical philosophy, or his conception of culture, it will be well to fix our attention principally upon Wilhelm Meister.

One of the most serious hindrances to the universal reputation of Goethe, is the difficulty of forming a distinct opinion about this novel. After Faust it is the most elaborate of Goethe's works ; but whereas Faust overpowers public opinion as if it were one of the greater masterpieces of Shakspeare, Wilhelm Meister is, I think, in general very faintly appreciated. In the first place it is a prose work, and as Goethe distinguished literary styles with great clearness, his prose is always real prose, and we are therefore not to look in Wilhelm Meister for any poetic charm. We have before us simply a novel, and even as such it does not fall under any of the classes of novel with which we are familiar. It is not in the least like a Waverley Novel. On the other hand it is not humorous, and reminds us neither of Jane Austen nor of

Sauley  
Waverley  
is W  
Wilhelm  
Meister

the eighteenth century novel, though in Werther Goethe had reproduced some of the principal characteristics of Richardson, nor does it at all anticipate the modern French novel or Thackeray. We look for an interesting story, and we do not find it; we look in vain for a series of life-like and amusing scenes ; we look for characters freshly conceived and vividly drawn, and we find only one or two such. In these circumstances we are driven to content ourselves with finding matter of admiration in particular passages, though Goethe, in general, more than any other great writer, attaches importance to the æsthetic whole. There is a delicate charm in the story of Mignon and in some of the songs of Mignon and the Harper, that incomparable lyrical dream, 'Kennst du das Land,' and that piece which consoled the last hours of Queen Louise of Prussia, 'Wer nie sein Brod mit Thränen ass.' The elaborate critique of Hamlet which occupies so large a space, will be interesting at least to English people, and when we remember the old controversy whether Coleridge or August Schlegel led the way to a really deep appreciation of Shakspeare's genius, we may be inclined to

decide that it was neither one nor the other, but Goethe in Wilhelm Meister. Many too will read with a profound interest the Confessions of a Beautiful Soul. But what conception of the book, as a whole, can we form by putting together criticisms on Hamlet, the memoirs of a pietist, the songs of a wandering harper, and the homesickness of an Italian exile? Has the book we ask, any subject, any unity at all? At least it seems to break asunder in the middle. Throughout the first and larger half, the reader makes no doubt that he has before him a novel on the theatre, such as it was easy to imagine Goethe, a playwright and the director of a theatre, conceiving, and his only complaint perhaps is that the subject is treated in a style too thorough and too minute to be amusing. But, as Scherer remarks, "We are astonished to find this apparent Theatre novel taking quite another turn, and the hero entering a new and professedly higher region. Was it necessary to discuss Shakspeare's Hamlet in such a detailed manner, to handle theatrical life as a whole, and solemnly to lay down principles such as Goethe later inculcated in his capacity of Director, if all this was only to illustrate an

aberration on the part of the hero?" It is clear that all this does not naturally introduce the Confessions of a Beautiful Soul, nor all the serious inquiries which occupy the latter part of the novel, nor does it attach itself naturally to the pathetic tale of the last days of Mignon. Scherer himself does not attempt to justify these defects in the design of the novel, but holds that Goethe hurried the conclusion of his book in order to get it off his hands. But we shall find much more unity in Wilhelm Meister if we regard it not as a theatrical novel, but as a novel of culture and education, and if we consider it in close connexion with Goethe's Life. The story of Mignon, as we have remarked, expresses that yearning after the ancient world, which was perhaps the deepest of all his feelings. The devotion to Shakspeare was his strongest feeling at a particular period of his life, the period when he undertook Wilhelm Meister. That it should disappear at a particular point of the novel, answers to that change in his views on which we have enlarged and which is represented in his life by his Italian journey. The Confessions of a Beautiful Soul taken together with the philosophy of the Uncle and his Hall of

man  
bei Wilhelm  
und Scherer  
von Goethe  
leben



the Past, represent the struggle which went on in Goethe's mind through the greater part of his life between two forms of religion, between certain Christian ideas from which he would never consent to part, and a sort of Heathenism which at times he avowed with the utmost frankness. And all this various material he has united in Wilhelm Meister by means of his practical philosophy of culture, which taught him that a man should study to develop all that is in him, that a man should spare no pains to discover his true vocation, and that in doing so he will receive little help from the reigning system of education, which excites wishes instead of awakening aptitudes. Looked at then in this way, the book sets before us more fully than any other book of Goethe's, and in a highly remarkable, if not in a perfectly satisfactory way, what we may call the Goethian philosophy of culture.

But besides the general view of religion which identifies it with Art and Science, we may discover in Goethe many more or less definite statements of religious doctrine. The most startling of these I now proceed to discuss.

2 Arten  
von  
Religion

Quot



## CHAPTER IX.

### THE GREAT HEATHEN.

IN his youth Goethe was acquainted with several eminently Christian persons, Fräulein von Klettenberg, the Frankfurt friend of his family, Jung Stilling, and Lavater. He listened to these not only with his unfailing good humour, but at times with more conviction than "Dichtung und Wahrheit" would lead us to suppose. In some of his early letters he himself adopts pietistic language. But as his own peculiar ideas developed themselves, they separated him more and more from the religious world of his time. At the time of his Italian journey, and for some years afterwards, we find him speaking of Christianity not merely with indifference, but with a good deal of bitterness. This hostility took rather a peculiar form. As the whole disposition of his mind leads him towards religion in a certain sense, as he can no more help being religious than he can help being a poet, he does not reject religion but

changes his religion. He becomes, or tries to become, a heathen in the positive sense of the word; for the description of Goethe as the Great Heathen is not a mere epithet thrown at him by his adversaries. He provoked and almost claimed it in his sketch of Winckelmann, where, after enthusiastic praise of the ancients and of Winckelmann as an interpreter of the ancient world, he inserted a chapter entitled, "Heidnisches," Heathenism, which begins thus: "This picture of the antique spirit, absorbed in this world and its good things, leads us directly to the reflexion that such excellences are only compatible with a heathenish way of thinking. The self-confidence, the attention to the present, the pure worship of the gods as ancestors, the admiration of them, as it were, only as works of art, the submission to an irresistible fate, the future hope also confined to this world, since it rests on the preciousness of posthumous fame; all this belongs so necessarily together, makes such an indivisible whole, creates a condition of human life intended by Nature herself, that we become conscious, alike at the height of enjoyment, and in the depth of sacrifice and even of ruin, of an indestructible health." Clearly when

he wrote this (in 1805) Goethe wished and intended to pass for a heathen. And, indeed, the antique attracts him scarcely at all from the historical side—he is no republican, no lover of liberty—but almost exclusively because it offers a religion which is to him the religion of health and joy.

*Religion  
Gesund  
und  
Freude*

This curious passage is perhaps the fundamental text on the subject of Goethe's heathenism. By heathenism he understands a healthy way of thinking, and this he considers to consist in a devotion to what is before us, to such happiness as is offered by the present life supplemented by the hope of fame after death. But we may ask whether this system is to be taken seriously, and whether elsewhere in Goethe's works we find it pursued in detail. Not, I think, in any systematic manner. Goethe is no writer of systematic treatises. In the vast mass of his epigrams and detached reflexions there are no doubt many which deal with morals and religion, and there is even a distinct section entitled *Ethisches*. But all this is fragmentary. He never yielded his mind to the inspiration of any moral system, heathen or Christian. Nor does he resemble our George

Eliot, who, after she had broken with Christianity, remained possessed by moral ideas, and wrote novel after novel to illustrate them. Still we may trace here and there the form which the heathenism avowed in the above passage took in his mind. He preaches at times with great emphasis what may be called a religion of healthy action, which is to have for its heaven posthumous renown.

The 'religion of the deed' comes before us in a well-known passage of Faust where, brooding over the New Testament, Faust quarrels with the text, "In the beginning was the Word" and after several attempts to emend it, decides that the true reading must be, In the beginning was the deed. The laconism which characterizes the First Part of Faust does not allow him there to explain himself further. But let us now turn to those stanzas which might be called the Psalm of Goethe, and which Carlyle has made familiar to us by his rough translation of them in "Past and Present." 'Silently,' he sings,

*Religious  
deed  
Faust  
Faust*

*Goethe's  
Psalm*

" Rest the stars above us  
And the graves beneath us,  
But from yonder world  
Cry the voices of the spirits

And the voices of the Masters,  
(Geister, Meister, a favourite jingle of Goethe's)  
Neglect not to put in exercise  
The forces of goodness."

We may venture to ask, in passing, why does Carlyle translate this,

"Choose well ; your choice is brief and yet endless" ?

Yet why not, seeing that Carlyle alters in a similar manner, and apparently to suit his private taste, a still more important passage, the famous Whole, Good and Beautiful itself. At the end of his paper on the Death of Goethe this is printed, so as actually to efface the rhyme, Im Ganzen, Guten, Wahren, resolut zu leben. Here 'wahren' is substituted for 'schönen,' 'true' for 'beautiful.'

But, to return, the exhortation is Be up and doing ; if anything good shows itself make the most of it, see that it does not run to waste. That he has here in view the 'religion of the deed' appears from the next stanza, which runs thus,—

"Here in the eternal stillness  
Crowns are weaving,  
Which are destined richly  
To reward those who are active,

(Die sollen mit Fülle, die *Thätigen* lohnen),  
And then the psalm closes with the sharp, sudden  
thunderpeal, Wir heissen euch hoffen,  
We bid you hope."

But it is in the Second Part of Faust that Goethe, who commonly abstains from dogmatism, does in a manner pledge himself to deliver a religious doctrine. We may here remark that though he lived and wrote beyond his eightieth year, Goethe is by no means a perfect example of a poetic genius resisting the effects of old age. On the contrary, in him especially we may study the symptoms of senile decay upon the poetic imagination. Even in the "West-östlicher Divan" we remark with surprise how much the poet is altered, who in his youth had been so fascinating by his freshness and spontaneity that he had given the nation an example of genius incarnated. Quite other is the poet who now studies artificially and by the help of learning to describe what is most remote from all his own thoughts and feelings, the life of the East. Still in some parts of this work, published when he was about seventy, for instance in the series of love-songs which make up the Book of Zuleikha, in the Book of Hafiz, and



in the brilliant picture of the Mohammedan Paradise at the close, he shows freshness enough to justify Heine's judgment that 'the magic of this book is indescribable.' But it is by comparing the Second with the First Part of Faust that we measure most easily the ravages of old age upon his powerful imagination. The First Part is by universal consent Goethe's crowning literary achievement, an unparalleled series of inimitable scenes and unforgettable lines. The Second Part must be admitted, even by those who admire it most in parts, to be as a whole almost unreadable. The First Act and the Fourth Act of it will be too much for all but the toughest readers. In the other three acts there is indeed much that is astonishing and not a little that is admirable, but perhaps even here not much that is satisfactory. It is in the Fifth Act that Goethe finds himself driven to offer some solution of the question which he has proposed in the First Part, the problem of life itself or of happiness. Faust has entered into his contract with Mephistopheles in order that he may live to be able to say to the moment, 'Stay, thou art fair,' in other words, to feel for a moment his life satisfactory to him and so

*symptoms  
series  
letters*

*Faust*



far to solve the problem of life. In the Fifth Act of the Second Part the time arrives for this promise to be redeemed. I do not believe, in spite of the German commentators, that any completely consistent explanation can be given of the contract of Faust with Mephistopheles. Goethe has, in fact, undertaken more than he can perform. We cannot expect a satisfactory solution, but from observing the form which the solution takes we may follow the course of Goethe's ideas on these great subjects. And what do we find? Faust, now in extreme old age, devotes himself to a life of practical beneficent energy. He obtains from the Emperor a grant of a large piece of sea coast, which it becomes his pride to convert into a seat of prosperous cultivation and of happy busy life for multitudes of men. When he has accomplished this he becomes aware of the approach of death and of the moment when he must settle with Mephistopheles. When that moment arrives he exults in his beneficent achievements, and adds "This is the last conclusion of wisdom; he alone deserves for himself freedom and life who has to conquer them every day." In short a daily course of

strenuous action, this alone is satisfactory life. And what is his hope in death? This; "it cannot be that the trace of my days on earth will pass away in æons of time." Here again appears the preciousness of posthumous fame which was one of the doctrines which, as we saw above, made up what Goethe was pleased to call heathenism. It is true that in a still later scene of "Faust" we find ourselves once more in the midst of Christian imagery, surrounded by visions of hell and paradise, by devils and angels who contend for Faust's immortal part. But even here the 'religion of the deed' is reaffirmed, for the angels sing "The noble spirit is saved, for we have the power to redeem him who labours ceaselessly striving."

There is much in these last scenes that is bewildering and intentionally mysterious. Nevertheless, if we compare Faust in these scenes with the Faust whose acquaintance we made at the opening of the First Part, we see as the total result of the development of the play that the former is as Götz, and the latter as Brother Martin. A strenuous energetic man, delighting in action from which practical good

results, has taken the place of a sedentary, self-dissatisfied man, secluded from his kind and oppressed by senseless vows of renunciation.

So far we may trace in Goethe a religious system which, if somewhat vague, is consistent both with itself and with the classicism of his artistic views. But there are also traces in his writings of another and a very different system.

## CHAPTER X.

### ANOTHER RELIGION.

WHAT has been said above of the heathenism of Goethe is based entirely, it will be remembered, upon Goethe's own declaration given on p. 137. That declaration, however, if it were taken too literally, might convey to us a very false notion of Goethe's way of thinking and character. For it might be taken to mean that Goethe meant to place himself in a position of deliberate and active hostility to Christianity, that he meant to labour for its destruction and for the establishment of another religion upon its ruins. And this might seem not quite incredible when we remember that he lived to see the period when such deliberate attempts to destroy Christianity and to found new religions were actually made, for he lived to see St. Simonianism. With his immense reputation and influence it would not have been strange if he had tried to assume such a position as St. Simon, or as Auguste Comte after him assumed,

and a Neo-heathenism would after all not have been much stranger than many other revivals and experiments in religion which the nineteenth century has witnessed.

But Goethe was the last man in the world to undertake such an experiment. He had not the ambition nor quite the talents which would have been needed by the leader of a school or sect which might have aimed at universal dominion. His knowledge extended, indeed, beyond literature into science, but he had by no means the universal knowledge of a dictator in the realm of thought. In particular we may remark that he always treated with indifference philosophic method. Every one remembers the contempt he pours upon this in "Faust," and scarcely less famous is the epigram written in his old age, in which, undertaking to explain how he has been able to rise so high, he says, "My child, I have been very discreet, I have always abstained from thinking about thinking,"

"Mein Kind, Ich habe es klug gemacht ;  
Ich habe nie uber's Denken gedacht."

But this, perhaps, is the last thing which the sovereigns of thought, who have usually begun

by being masters of method, have been able to say.

But neither, I think, did Goethe ever conceive the ambition of occupying such a position. His ambition, indeed, was by no means confined to literature. He would, perhaps, have felt more pleasure could he have been acknowledged as a great scientific discoverer than in feeling himself the author of the great poem of the age, and he did travel a good way out of literature into practical administration. But he had no taste for the position of a party leader, whether in thought and philosophy or in politics. His disposition was towards conciliation and a peaceful life. Thus he passed through one of the most stormy periods in the history of the world without attaching himself to any party. He admitted no contentious elements into his life, not even so much as is found unavoidable by almost every Englishman, and that though the most extreme party disputes were always raging about him, though he could well remember the days of Frederick the Great and Voltaire, and though the battle of Jena was fought in his neighbourhood. Yet even in his old age he received with perfect indifference the news of

the revolution of July, he who had treated with almost equal indifference so many revolutions more violent still. Of a man so inclined we may feel that it is absurd to suppose that he can ever have seriously contemplated leading a deadly attack upon Christianity in order to set up heathenism in its place. We are obliged, therefore, to suppose that after all it was only a kind of constructive heathenism that he contemplated, and we must be prepared also to find that it was not actually Christianity, but perhaps only a certain view of Christianity, to which he was so mortally opposed.

It must be admitted that the belief that the Christian way of thinking is essentially unhealthy does very widely pervade his works. He hates asceticism, or what he calls "abstinence," in every form ; he has no patience with what Carlyle calls "the worship of sorrow," and refuses even to let his mind dwell on images of pain or grief. The very thought, for instance, of pictures of the crucifixion or of martyrdoms infuriates him ; he pronounces them to be odious and profane. By heathenism on the other hand he means what Heine calls "Lebensherrlichkeit," a splendid and glorious or harmonious



view of life, in which pain and evil are in a manner suppressed. To call this heathenism is evidently a very lax use of language, but we have said enough already of the train of thought by which Goethe justified it. He imagines such a harmonious existence to have existed in the Hellenic world. It is neither the age of Plutarch, we are to observe, nor the age of Pericles which he thus idealizes. It is scarcely even the Homeric age, but rather the age of heroes and demigods, or the life of the gods on Olympus. Perhaps he may have regarded it as the great deficiency in his own literary career, and so may his admirers now well regard it, that he never added to his divine Iphigenie other plays conceived in a similar spirit and on a similar subject, that for instance he never wrote his Iphigenie in Delphi nor that Nausicaa which occupied his imagination so much at the time when he visited Sicily. But this turn of mind, this impatience of contemplating evil, this horror of abstinence and asceticism produces other effects which are visible in his writings. This, perhaps, it is which prevents him from being a great tragic poet. A very great lyric poet he is, and he has an extraordinary talent for epic

*ine  
sensation  
analysis*

narration, but he can scarcely be said to have produced in the strict sense of the word a great tragedy. Iphigenie is scarcely a tragedy, and still less can the title be given to Faust. How can a man write a tragedy who will not allow his mind to dwell on sorrow? His female characters also, at least those which are most characteristic of his pen, bring to mind the Tecmessas, Deianiras, Cassandras, of Attic tragedy. Such are Clärchen, Marianne, Philine, above all Gretchen. They are unfortunates, who suggest to him many reflexions upon the inferior lot of woman and her sadly restricted happiness. Yet these he paints with far more success than the woman of modern civilization, the woman elevated by Christianity, who in his hands, as in the case of the two Leonôres of Tasso, acquires no such wonderful individuality. The form of life that fascinates him is expressed when he says,—

“In der heroischen Zeit, da Götter und Göttinnen liebten,  
Folgte Begierde dem Blick, folgte Genuss der Begier.”

In the heroic age when gods and goddesses loved, desire followed hard on sight and enjoyment on desire.

Would we understand how he worked out

*Gretchen  
Faust = Tragedy*

such an extremely primitive theory, we had better perhaps read the satirical attack on Wieland, which he wrote in 1773, and entitled "Götter, Helden und Wieland."

Nor does Goethe commonly speak with any rancorous hostility of Christianity. That tone is indeed to be found in some parts of his writings. I notice among the Venetian epigrams, for instance, several which show such a feeling. But in general he is too good-natured and too averse to party contentions to take such a tone. He prefers on the whole to parade a large-minded appreciation, rather conservative than pious, of Christianity. He appears, indeed, always strongly interested in the subject, and is capable at times of treating it in a highly reverential manner. In *Wilhelm Meister* we have a picture of Christian pietism, tenderly and pleasingly drawn, in which, if belief is not actually professed, at least disbelief is not even hinted at. In the celebrated passage of *Faust*, where Gretchen catechizes her lover about his religious belief, it will be remarked indeed that he remains absolutely silent when she names Christianity directly, "Denn du hast kein Christenthum," but the eloquent pro-

test with which he answers her agonized question "Glaubst du an Gott?" if it may be thought vague, has at least the tone of belief, and is certainly not heathenish. The age of Voltaire and of the French Revolution had in fact passed away; with the nineteenth century a revival of Christianity set in everywhere, and it became more difficult than it had been for a man who was bent upon keeping himself clear of parties, and whose inclination was conservative, to talk the wild language of the revolutionary period.

Goethe had early associations with the religious world, and in one respect he had always been religious, for he had always been an earnest student and an ardent admirer of the Bible. He has an enthusiastic description of the class of people whom he remembered in the Germany of the eighteenth century to have earned the title of *bibeljest* (West. Div. Noten und Abhandlungen, in the chapter on Hafiz), and in the second book of the poem (Hafis Namen) he claims this title for himself, and goes so far as to write, after saying that Hafiz derived his name from his profound knowledge of the Koran, "I am just like thee, since I have

taken to myself the glorious image of our sacred books, as the Lord's image impressed itself upon that cloth of cloths, and have refreshed myself in the silence of the breast, in spite of all denial, hindrance, deprivation, with the enlivening image of faith."

We expect to find that in his long life Goethe made some more decided declaration on the subject of religion. And, indeed, in one of his later works, Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre, we find such a declaration. The work in general is somewhat desultory and confused; it is not one of Goethe's interesting works, but the first chapters of the second book of it made the profoundest impression upon Carlyle. Here he speaks of religion not merely in the sense of the view we ought to take of the highest questions, but in the narrower sense of Heiligtümer, the best ceremonies, ritual or form of worship. We are here told that for the complete development of the human being one all-important thing is needed, which nevertheless nature does not give us. This is reverence, and there are three kinds of it. The first is reverence for that which is above us, for the God who reveals Himself in parents and teachers. The second

*Wilhelm  
Meister's  
Wanderjahre*

is reverence for that which is below us. The first reverence he desires to see expressed symbolically by arms crossed over the breast and eyes fixed joyfully upon the sky; the second by hands folded behind and looks fixed on the ground to mark that from the earth we derive infinite joys but also sorrows out of proportion. This second reverence leads on to a third which is directed towards equals and comrades. The religion which is compounded of these three reverences, adds Goethe, is already professed by a great part of mankind, though unconsciously. It is contained in the Creed, of which the first article is ethnic, and belongs to all nations, the second Christian, and belongs to those who struggle with sorrows and are made perfect in suffering, and the third teaches an inspired communion of saints. May not then the three divine Persons under whose image and name such convictions and promises are expressed, be rightly regarded as the highest unity? And thus we find Goethe in his old age proclaiming a sort of Neo-Christianism.

He then conducts us into a hall adorned with pictures. Here the ethnical religion is illustrated by scenes from the history of Israel,



with which, however, scenes from other histories are intermixed. There are one or two indications given by the way that Goethe has not really changed his earlier opinion so much as might appear. He had called himself a heathen, and now we find him saying, "Among all heathen religions, for such a religion is that of Israel, this one has great advantages." He had always been a lover of the Bible, and here we have a magnificent eulogy of the 'excellent collection of the sacred books' of Israel.

We are next conducted into an inner hall in which the story of the Gospels with their miracles and parables is unrolled before us in like manner. But the story ends with the last supper, for Goethe remembers here too his old convictions. Of the sufferings and death of the divine man, we are told by the administrators of the system, no mystery is made, but we draw a veil over them just because we revere them so much. We count it a culpable profanity to expose the cross and the Holy One suffering on it to the gaze of the sun, who turned his face away when an impious age forced the spectacle upon him, and with all those deep mysteries in which the divine abyss of sorrow lies hidden, to



play, to sport and trifle, and not to rest until what is most venerable has been made to appear common and absurd.

We do not linger here upon this singular invention, though it is a good example, as Carlyle felt, of Goethe's unrivalled dexterity in style. But it belongs to a period when his utterances had lost much of their old weight and seriousness. Nevertheless, we cannot but be struck by the pains he takes in this work, to express the profound reverence he has gradually learnt to feel for Christianity. He who in earlier life had found no answer to those who said to him, "Du hast kein Christenthum," now tells us, "Humanity cannot take a retrograde step, and we may say that the Christian religion, now that it has once appeared, can never again disappear, now that it has once found a divine embodiment cannot again be dissolved."

In these last years of Goethe the world was once more assuming a revolutionary aspect. The nations seemed to be recovering from the shock of the downfall of Napoleon. 1830 seemed to promise a Second Part of the drama of the French Revolution. A new outbreak of the armies of France, a new attack upon Monarchy,

and a new attack upon Christianity seemed to be at hand. The thinkers of this new time were called upon not merely to reject Christianity, but to furnish a new religion which might better suit the modern time. St. Simonianism was abroad, and the ideas which soon afterwards took the names of Positivism and Religion of Humanity were in the air. These circumstances give additional significance to these last utterances of Goethe. He seems deliberately to refuse his adhesion to all movements of this kind. Thus in chapter xi. of book iii. of the *Wanderjahre* we find him returning to the subject of religion. "All religions," he writes, "press men to reconcile themselves to the inevitable ; each furnishes its own solution to this problem. The Christian lends a gracious help by means of faith, love, and hope. Out of these springs patience, a sweet feeling what a precious gift existence continues to be (this is the Goethian optimism which we noticed above), even when in place of the desired enjoyment the most intolerable misery is heaped upon it. By this religion we abide steadfastly, though in a peculiar manner."

To sum up, then, by the side of the Neo-

Heathenism, which Goethe in comparatively early life adopts from Winckelmann, we discover in him other elements of religion. Throughout his life he is a rapt adorer of the God in Nature. He sings :

“Was kann der Mensch im Leben mehr gewinnen  
Als dass ihm Gott-Natur sich offenbare ? ”

What can human being attain in life beyond this, that God-Nature should reveal itself to him ?

Again, at all periods, alike in youth and in age, we find him a devoted reader of the Bible, of “the excellent collection of sacred books left us by the Hebrews.” Nor is he now content, as in his heathenish time, with a future hope confined to this world. In his last years at least he appeared as a believer in immortality. That profound optimism, that assurance that nature must have provided for man whatever is necessary for his well-being, influenced him here. Thus in the “Zahme Xenien” we find him writing, ‘You ask what are my grounds for this belief ; the weightiest is this, that we cannot do without it.’ But he is also a conservative, one who all along was bewildered and repelled by the French Revolution. Accordingly, in his old age, when it threatened to break out

again and he saw a new period beginning, in which its rashest experiments seemed likely to be renewed, he deliberately dissuaded us from any attempt to found a new religion. Thus we find him writing to Carlyle, as Mr. Froude prints his words, Von der Société St. Simonien bitte Dich fern zu halten. And he counselled us in founding our future society to make Christianity a principal element in its religion.

If we try to sum up the general view which has been given of Goethe's philosophy we shall see that on the one hand he has treated two or three topics with great originality and thoroughness, and also that he has been the author of a vast mass of pregnant sentences, some one of which usually rewards the student who gives an odd half hour to Goethe's works. But he is rather the greatest moralist, the most pregnant thinker among poets, than independently a great moralist or philosopher. His contempt for philosophic method deprived his thought of all systematic character, while at the same time he wanted the temperament of a reformer, which is almost necessarily more or less com-

bative. His greatness is therefore, after all, in the main literary.

We cannot help reflecting here how much his reputation among ourselves has been the work of Mr. Carlyle. And yet it may surprise us that Mr. Carlyle of all men should conceive such an unbounded admiration for Goethe. Mr. Carlyle had no desire to revive the ancient world; he was in no degree a Hellenist. He was somewhat impatient of Art in any shape, and he grew to be altogether intolerant of metrical composition. He was devoted to history, a study in which Goethe never much interested himself. He was an ardent admirer of Puritanism, which Goethe, we may safely say, would have regarded, if he had ever regarded it at all, with intense repugnance. His unbounded grandiloquence makes his style precisely such as Goethe, who calls himself "the mortal enemy of all empty noise in language," could have least endured. Was it then by mere caprice, we ask, that Carlyle heaped on Goethe such eulogies, as to any one but Carlyle would have seemed fulsome if applied to the greatest name in all poetry? The truth is first that in Goethe's works Carlyle fixes his attention

upon comparatively few passages, to which he refers again and again. The "religion of the deed" has produced a profound impression upon him, and has suggested all that is to be found in Carlyle's writings about the supreme nobleness and sacredness of work. He has also been deeply struck by Goethe's habit of identifying God and Nature. He is never tired of quoting the epigram which begins :—

"Was wär' ein Gott der nur von aussen stiesse."

What should we think of a God who only gave an impulse from without ?

And whenever we meet in Carlyle with the phrase, "The awful Unnameable of this Universe," we are to consider that we have a reference to the passage in Faust, *Wer darf Ihn nennen?*—Who may name Him ?

But, secondly, it is scarcely as a poet or as a literary man at all that Carlyle, whatever he may say, principally regards Goethe. Carlyle's homage is reserved for heroes, and it is as a hero, a spiritual hero, that he does homage to Goethe. He does not think mainly of his writings, but of his personality and of his relation to the period in which they both lived.



His worship of Goethe must be considered in connection with his apocalyptic vision of that age, of the celestial-infernal portent of the French Revolution, which had consummated the long decline of Europe through the eighteenth century, and had made necessary a complete reconstruction both of institutions and ways of thought. The eighteenth century, he told us, had ended in bankruptcy, having undermined by means of Voltaire all faith, and having destroyed by its mechanical philosophy all worthy and noble views of the Universe. He himself arrived on the morrow of this catastrophe, and the problem for his generation, as it approached the middle of the nineteenth century, was to reconstruct a world that had been destroyed, and to revive an idealism that had long been slowly perishing. It was Carlyle's belief that such work as this could be done only in one way, namely, by heroes, sent and commissioned for the purpose. He seems to have been disappointed in general by the distinguished men of his age; but if we admit his premises, we shall hardly be surprised at his finding in Goethe the spiritual hero commissioned more than any other man to do that



part of the necessary work which was concerned with thought, speech, and literature. For who else in that age, or we may say, in any age, represented the higher literature with such a magnificent pose? In general, the word hero, which Carlyle applies to his historical favourite, seems exaggerated; but Goethe was elevated enough in his way of thinking, in the persistence with which through sixty years he continued to write and think without regard to popular opinion, putting behind him all commonness as resolutely as he said Schiller did; he was elevated enough to deserve the title hero. In him Carlyle might see fulfilled the dream which haunted him of a man sent down with direct divine commission to deliver mankind in its difficulties. His very appearance excited admiration, and so Lockhart, who had known him, remarked to Scott, "how much any one must be struck with the majestic beauty of Goethe's countenance, the noblest certainly by far that I have ever yet seen." (Life of Sir Walter Scott, p. 384.)

*Conclusion* If now we consider, in conclusion, what his literary greatness amounts to, we shall remark first that in Faust, however open the Second Part of

it may be to criticism, he produced the greatest poetic work of the nineteenth century, and yet the nineteenth in respect of poetry stands pretty high among the centuries. Secondly, in his own country he achieved a work, and attained a literary pre-eminence, which has not been paralleled in any other country. He may be said to have created modern German literature; he ruled it while he lived; and if by literature we understand poetry, it is hardly yet clear that he did not take it away with him. At least there has been no German poet since, with the exception of Heinrich Heine, who has commanded the attention of all Europe.

He has, I think, a third distinction. Before him poetic genius of the highest order was a kind of mystery, concerning which we had little information. We knew nothing of Homer; we had scarcely any detailed information about Dante; our knowledge of the biography of Shakspeare was confined to two or three unimportant facts. Goethe took us behind the scenes and showed us in the fullest detail how a great poetic genius thinks and feels. He left in the first place a considerable mass of autobiography, for if *Dichtung und Wahrheit* covers only his first period

he left also a more summary narrative, which, under the title of *Annalen und Jahreshefte*, carries the story down to the year 1822. He also wrote under the title of *Italienische Reise* a full account of what was to him the most important chapter of his life, his visit to Italy.

He recorded also other passages of his life, for instance his experiences in the French Campaign of 1792. Yet what Goethe himself has told us is but a small part of our knowledge of his life. We have also the vast mass of his correspondence, and the information we obtain from all these sources is particularly copious on the subject of his genius. He tells us of the moods through which his mind passed, of the literary plans he formed, of the changes he perceived in himself, of all the movements of the consciousness of a great genius through a long life. The mystery is here divulged, the more completely because Goethe more than most poets combines the power and habit of conscious reflexion with the spontaneity of genius. So that we may almost say that Goethe has compensated to mankind for its almost total loss of the biography of Shakspeare.

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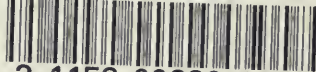


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